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Adult Education Research Conference

Adult Education in Global Times: An  
International Research Conference (AEGT2021)  
(Vancouver, BC)

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## Transformative listening across global contexts: Fostering authentic connection to self, other and community

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### Recommended Citation

Anderson, L., Cotter, T., Romano, A., Longmore, A. & Kramlich, D. (2021). Transformative listening across global contexts: Fostering authentic connection to self, other and community. AERC [Paper] presented as a part of the Adult Education in Global Times Conference. University of British Columbia. Canada.

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# **TRANSFORMATIVE LISTENING ACROSS GLOBAL CONTEXTS: SITUATED LEARNING THEORY AND THE USE OF A LISTENING PROTOCOL TO CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR LISTENING AND CONNECTION**

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## **Abstract**

As a group of global scholars, we see authentic listening, with its focus on attention and presence, as crucial to the formation of trust, connection, and the facilitation of learning. We co-created the Transformative Listening Collaborative and a Transformative Listening Protocol (the Protocol) as a means to increase awareness of the importance of authentic listening as a transformative component of learning through story. The Protocol is intended to improve listening skills, foster deep sense-making, and generate contextually situated spaces in which participants may connect with another, understand another, and/or learn more deeply about oneself.

Keywords: listening, protocol, transformation, global, connection

In this time of global division and fragmentation, an important goal of adult education is to co-create opportunities for learners to connect and cultivate relationships across intersections of race, class, gender, ethnicity, as well as cultural, national, generational, functional or disciplinary boundaries. Through these opportunities, learners might become change agents—aware of the holistic connected nature of our experience and develop the compassion for global and cultural healing and social justice. Adult learning, when “described in relation to embodied learning, the emotions, spirituality, relational learning, art-based learning, and storytelling” (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p. 4), requires us to promote a holistic attention to oneself and others and create spaces for listening and true and authentic connections to develop. Engaging in storytelling, and more specifically listening, can play a key role in creating these spaces and facilitating connection and healing (McCann et al., 2019). Yet speech is often privileged over listening (Jacobs & Coghlan, 2005) in learning contexts, with the role of listening often assumed but not always specifically addressed.

As the Transformative Listening Collaborative, a group of global adult education scholars, we offer that listening as a core competency can be learned. And further that, when practiced in the context of storytelling, listening may effectively facilitate connection with others. We developed the Protocol (see Appendix) to create spaces for listening. We contend that the Protocol, when used in dyadic storytelling contexts, improves listening capacity, facilitates authentic listening, and generates spaces in which those using the Protocol may connect with and seek to understand another, and/or learn more deeply about

oneself. Adult situated learning theory provides the theoretical framework to support our findings around the effectiveness of the Protocol as a tool in both facilitating a *process* to improve listening and in creating a *space* of practice that allows for enhanced learning, listening and connection.

We advocate that the Protocol be used with dyads in a variety of situated practice contexts including, but not limited to: the classroom to create opportunities for embodied, relational learning; faculty development when making sense of one's practice and one's emerging identity as an educator; meetings to create space for team-building, shared meaning, and understanding; and organizations to foster inclusive and distributed leadership practice.

In this paper we describe the theoretical framework we applied to the Protocol in learning to listen contexts, our iterative methodology for the development of the Protocol and themes revealed in our initial alpha testing of the Protocol as well as future plans and implications related to these specific themes for adult learning.

### **Theoretical Framework—Learning to Listen in Situated Context**

Marsick and Watkins (2018) suggested that learning happens formally, informally and incidentally as adults navigate their lives. Learning to learn can be thought of as both a goal or outcome and a process (Candy, 1990, as cited in MacKeracher, 2004). Rimanonczy and Turner (2008) proposed, "while the assimilation of one's learning is personal, a context of social activities always exists to frame and generate learning." Vygotsky referred to this as "situated learning", indicating that social interaction plays a key role in the development of cognition (p.188). MacKeracher (2004) argued that all knowledge is contextually situated and is fundamentally influenced by the activity (process), context (space), and culture (safety) in which it is developed and used. An elemental social activity in which learners engage is that of conversation or storytelling. It is argued that meaning is constructed through conversations or stories and conversations are a form of meaning-making processes through which one's experiences are transformed into knowledge (Kolb et al., 2002; Wenger, 1998). Our traditional ideas about communication places speaking or talking as the driver for meaning construction with listening as the passive receiver (Lipari, 2014). Situated learning theory would argue that the knowledge and skills related to one's everyday life "can be learned most effectively within the actual context where they are used" (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 202). We offer that listening can be learned as a knowledge and a skill within the context in which it is practiced.

MacKeracher reminds us that "Situated cognition/learning describes an emerging body of ideas covering both the nature of learning and the design of learning experiences" (2004, p. 201). Consistent with the lens of situated learning, we purposefully designed and facilitated listening experiences by developing and applying the Protocol as a tool to guide the process and context. "Tools can be fully understood through us and using them entails both changing the user's view of the world and adopting the belief system of the culture in which they are used" (Brown et al., 1989). The Protocol and its application are a "designed learning experience" which creates a space, or "situation", that facilitates an awareness, development and strengthening of listening as an element in forming connections. Rendon (2014) explains, "In listening we can experience a deep presence and recognize how at a very basic, even spiritual level, sharing the stories of our humanity opens us to a deeper connection with others and ultimately with ourselves" (p. 51). We appreciate how Lave and Wenger (2011) characterize this connection, "Learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (p. 51). The space created by the Protocol allows for a structured world of potential safety where listening, learning and connection can happen.

## **Methodology—Iterative Process of Creating the Protocol**

As an interdisciplinary group of colleagues, we each brought forward ideas framed by our respective areas of expertise and theoretical perspectives to create the original prototype of the Protocol. We then engaged in an emergent iterative prototype inquiry method (Bogers & Horst, 2013) to develop and test the Protocol in diverse settings. To date, the prototype of the Protocol has been tested in various settings and cultures by the seven global researchers in the collaborative, with continuous/ongoing feedback provided by users and researchers informing further modifications of both the Protocol and its implementation.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants in classes, conference sessions, and professional development seminars. Participants were invited to engage in using the Protocol in face-to-face and virtual situations. After using the Protocol, participants completed an online survey where they reflected on their experiences with the Protocol, and their thoughts on the effectiveness of the Protocol. The survey instrument evolved through successive stages of operationalization into open-ended questions that gauge the effectiveness of the Protocol in creating learning spaces to enhance the experience of listening, connection and thus adult learning.

In this paper we focus on our findings to date regarding the efficacy of the Protocol in facilitating the process and creating the space or context for authentic listening, connection and learning. Our specific analysis focuses on question 1a and b of the survey:

"Reflecting on a listening experience without the Protocol, how does that compare with a listening experience using the Protocol?"

We deepened our analysis with the following questions:

"How has the use of the Protocol created a learning environment, space or context?"  
"; "In what ways, if any, has the use of the Protocol enhanced the experience of listening and thus adult learning?"

## **Data Analysis—NVivo**

The data was aggregated within and across all the research sites using the Protocol. We carried out coding with the use of NVivo 12 software, engaged in several cycles of focused NVivo coding, to review the data with fresh eyes and categorize data within NVivo labels (called nodes). We then conducted a second level of axial coding to create codes for the core categories emerging from the first level of textual analysis. To ensure coding was grounded in the data, we concentrated on developing codes which, where possible, reflected both the words of the participants and individual and collective processes. According to this iterative approach, data analysis was triangulated with multiple researchers analyzing and reviewing the themes that emerged and how they fit within the research questions identified above.

## **Findings—Efficacy of Protocol in Creating Spaces for Listening**

The thematic analysis carried out with NVivo highlighted emerging categories of connection, authentic listening, and learning to listen, in addition to the process and content created by the Protocol. The first emerging category represented how the adoption of the Protocol facilitated the connection with others through authentic listening: participants reported that the Protocol worked as an "*excellent set of questions*" [that] "*will lead to connection and insight the participants may not predict*". Another participant responded: "[It was] *Embarrassing at the beginning of the conversation. As the questions evolved, a kind of intimacy was created which led to a relaxed opening*".

These findings confirmed the effectiveness of the Protocol in offering a process through which listeners and storytellers may acquire a more complex and deeper listening capacity: "*it's not only about listening, that we apply every day in our work practices*" - a participant said - "*but it's more about "hearing" with the use of the Protocol*". Listening through the process provided by the set of questions and steps described in the Protocol fostered learning about listening, that is *learning who I am in the listening relationships and how my listening capacity may develop*. Another participant added:

The use of the Protocol makes me perceive listening as a constant exercise of attention, intention, volition, participation, rationality. Aspects on which I probably had not thought enough before this experience, but which clarify how active listening is an educational tool: it becomes an educational-relational practice that facilitates the encounter between narrator and listener, which favors a more relaxed and therefore frees the narration (despite being a structured tool) and the grasping of the non-verbal and paraverbal aspects.

An additional, emerging category focused on the use of the Protocol for creating a space and situation where situated learning and authentic listening may occur:

The listening experience with Protocol has allowed me to reflect on the method of listening without guidance. Surely the knowledge of the Protocol made me reflect on active listening, on staying focused on the story to listen to and on returning emotions and feelings to the narrator.

The situated context facilitated by the Protocol functioned as a safe space where people shared stories and developed connection with others. The adoption of the Protocol allowed conditions for people to feel heard and recognized for their values and their stories.

## **Conclusions**

Findings to date support the efficacy of the Protocol in both facilitating a *process* to improve listening and in creating a *space* that allows for enhanced listening, connection and learning. Our findings to date also suggest the practice of listening may be strengthened through participation in a situationally contextualized process with the use of the Protocol. Situated learning theory suggests, understanding and experience are mutually inclusive with participants in a sociocultural practice learning with and through relationship with one another, engagement in purposeful activity, and using tools and artifacts (Lave & Wenger, 2011). Indeed, we feel our work with the Protocol to date opens a door for those using it to revisit pre-existing notions and understanding of listening and learning.

The discussion of our methodological experience has some inherent limitations. The empirical investigation, was based on individual responses gathered by learners of different genders, cultures, educational backgrounds, and ages who were engaged across disciplines. Nevertheless, a convenience sample implicitly cannot exclude bias, especially culturally situated ones (Taylor & Snyder, 2012, pp. 42-44). Moreover, there are some methodological issues to take into account: the introduction to the use of the Protocol varied slightly from one setting to another, and data was not completely homogeneous. In addition, some of the participants were not fully satisfied by the use of the Protocol.

Despite, or precisely because of these limitations, future implications and forthcoming research should investigate learning about the value of listening more broadly, individual holistic transformation, providing detailed description of the methodological framework and iterative process of developing the Protocol. Accordingly, further research of listening, storytelling, and the use of the Protocol could explore the development of listening

as transformative which may solicit the cognitive, affective and spiritual transformation of individuals in the process of listening through story.

Our purpose is to study and deepen how the Protocol might have different effects according to cross-cultural differences across global contexts. Future research will include comparative analysis and data from additional countries, and will build on the potential for the spaces created by the Protocol to facilitate learners to become change agents for global and cultural healing and social justice.

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## Appendix

### Transformative Listening Protocol

This activity was designed by the Transformative Listening Project in conjunction with the [2018 International Transformative Learning Conference](#), “Building Transformative Community: Enacting Possibility in Today’s Times.” It is meant to improve appreciative listening skills through sharing and responding to stories in pairs and in groups.

