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## Enacting Rhetorical Listening: A Process to Support Students' Engagement with Challenging Course Readings

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Enacting Rhetorical Listening: A Process to Support Students' Engagement with Challenging Course Readings

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## **Abstract**

Many educators assign course readings to purposefully enlarge students' perspectives. In doing so, though, educators may face a range of behaviors—reluctance, resistance, avoidance, disengagement—from students who feel that such readings negatively press upon their prior knowledge, belief systems, or educational goals. This teaching challenge is often present for social justice educators. However, “rhetorical listening,” a rhetorical theory developed by Ratcliffe (2005), is a pedagogical tool that can help shift students' understandings of and expectations for the activity of reading, thereby creating a learning environment that supports meaningful engagement with challenging course readings. In this article, the author outlines a process for enacting rhetorical listening and describes the pedagogical outcomes that have been achieved through this process.

*Keywords:* literacy development, social justice teaching, student engagement, teacher education

Many educators assign course readings to purposefully enlarge students' perspectives. In doing so, though, educators may face a range of behaviors—reluctance, resistance, avoidance, disengagement—from students who feel that such readings negatively press upon their prior knowledge, belief systems, or educational goals. This can be the case particularly for social justice educators, teachers who push students to confront the ethical consequences of their actions and beliefs. As an English teacher educator, for example, I push students to examine the ethical dimensions of teaching standard written English. When my students become secondary or college-level English teachers, it is likely that they will be asked or required to teach standard written English. As a social justice educator, I believe that it is imperative for

my students to grapple with the arguments that surround this expectation to create ethical pedagogical practices. As a result, I assign readings such as Baker-Bell's (2017) book chapter, "I Can Switch My Language, But I Can't Switch My Skin": What Teachers Must Understand About Linguistic Racism." With this reading and others like it, I want my students to grapple with hard ideas (such as systemic racism) that are related to their future work. In these conversations, I do not want students to tell me what they think I want to hear or avoid the reading. Like many social justice educators, I hope these conversations open dialogue among multiple perspectives and foster critical thinking on these topics.

However, as many social justice educators know, creating productive dialogue can be difficult. As Applebaum (2009) explains, "social justice education [can be] accused of being ideological and counter to education" (p. 382). When students believe that education can somehow be "neutral" or free from ideology, they often view challenging course reading as a process that must be endured, rather than engaged. While some students may never be convinced that education is, in fact, always ideological, "rhetorical listening," a rhetorical theory developed by Ratcliffe (2005), helps me engage this tension and create a more productive learning environment. In this article, I share a process for enacting rhetorical listening. This process, I argue, is a pedagogical tool for helping students engage with ideas that they may find ideologically challenging.

## Rhetorical Listening and Reading

The distinction between hearing someone and listening to someone is commonplace. Many people have had the experience of saying, "You may be hearing me, but you are not listening to me." Listening is a common way people convey the moments when they feel understood or when someone attempts to understand their perspective. It is this distinction between hearing and listening that Ratcliffe (2005) builds upon in her theory of rhetorical listening. Ratcliffe (2005) defines rhetorical listening as "a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (p. 1). For Ratcliffe (2005), choosing to be open to a text means we actively attempt to understand ourselves and others. We identify the places where our commonalities and differences shape our responses to texts and analyze how cultures shape these responses. In this pursuit, we proceed with what Ratcliffe (2005) terms as "an accountability logic," which is the recognition that we have a stake in each other's lives. The ultimate purpose of rhetorical listening is to "promote productive communication, especially but not solely cross-culturally" (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 25). Accordingly, the theory encourages us to actively listen in a way that promotes understanding and further dialogue.

The practice of rhetorical listening emphasizes how our engagement with and responses to texts are always constructed—by our identities, lived experience, prior knowledge, beliefs, and values—rather than inevitable or fixed. When we conceptualize our engagement with texts as something we make, rather than something that happens to us, we are positioned to study and learn from that process. We can, in fact, gain a better understanding of self and others. When we apply this process to the activity of reading, we are able to identify and examine the ways readers create meaning from texts. Additionally, we are able to learn from the ways readers construct similar and/or different meanings from readings.

Asking students to rhetorically listen to a challenging course reading creates a new purpose for the activity of reading. It shifts the focus from receiving an author's ideas to creating an understanding of our individual and collective engagement with an author's ideas. In doing so, educators can help students grasp the active—rather than passive—nature of reading. To clarify this process of creating an understanding, Ratcliffe (2005) provides the following explanation:

[R]hetorical listeners might best invert the term understanding and define it as standing under, that is, consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular—and very fluid—standpoints. Standing under discourses means letting discourses wash over, through, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics. (p. 28)

When listening rhetorically, we slow down our response to a reading, actively paying attention to how language is washing over, through, and around us.

The process that I have designed to enact rhetorical listening involves two parts: an opportunity for students to rhetorically listen to a reading individually and an opportunity for students to share and discuss these experiences in small and/or whole-class discussions. Prompting students to actively construct a reading of a text, analyze that construction individually, and discuss those constructions collectively allows learners to engage with the ideas raised in the readings and with each other's perspectives. Both the individual reading and the discussion experiences are framed by three questions, which are described below. The questions that I offer—ones inspired by Ratcliffe's (2005) theory—are ones that I use to shift students' expectations for reading and promote dialogue about the ideas raised in the readings. Because the goal of rhetorical listening is a better understanding of self and others, these questions make those possibilities visible, which is necessary for critical thinking and engagement.

## Questions to Facilitate Rhetorical Listening

To introduce rhetorical listening to students, I explain that rhetorical listening is reading for a new purpose—to gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and others. According to Ratcliffe (2005), rhetorical listening focuses on “listening with intent,” rather than for intent of an author (p. 46). Accordingly, this process focuses primarily on how varying readers construct meaning from a text. The course reading, then, is a vehicle for gaining a deeper understanding of how we relate to the ideas raised in the reading and how our understandings are similar and different from others. In this way, rhetorical listening helps us pay attention to our reading processes and facilitate class discussion. To prepare students for this practice, I first describe closed—as opposed to open—stances toward reading. For example, rhetorical listening is not reading to find ideas that support our own, reading to identify the places where we agree or disagree, nor reading to prove that an argument, idea, or perspective is wrong. During this explanation, I emphasize that these other purposes for reading are not wrong. In fact, they are necessary and important in particular contexts. I aim to make clear, though, that these purposes for reading are not associated with rhetorical listening.

After defining rhetorical listening, I introduce the three questions that are described below. Together, the questions enact different facets of rhetorical listening, and we use these questions individually and collectively. First, I ask students to reflect upon these questions when reading independently outside of class. This process allows students to examine how they are actively constructing meaning from the text. Then, I frame our class discussion about our reading experiences around these questions. Sharing our individual rhetorical listening experiences in small or whole-class discussions allows students to learn from each other’s experiences. It also challenges us to consider how and why we might want to expand or revise our understandings of the reading.

### What is happening as I engage with the ideas in this text?

The first question that I ask students to pursue is: “What is happening as I engage with the ideas in this text?” As students read, they may utilize reading practices that they find helpful, such as underlining, annotating, or talking with the author(s) in the margins. These practices can help students track their emotional and intellectual responses to the reading. I ask students to keep notes in response to this question because it supports the class discussion that follows the individual reading experience. However, I do not require students to share this information with me. Because I care about students’ authentic engagement with the reading, I do not want this part of the process to be shaped by their performance in class. Students often choose to share this information with me and their peers during the class discussion, but it is important to me that students have an opportunity to grapple privately with this question.

## How am I making sense of these ideas?

As students document their responses to the first question, I also challenge them to account for their own positions and logics or assumptions by addressing the following question: “How am I making sense of these ideas?” In particular, I ask students to note the identities, lived experience, prior knowledge, or values that they bring to their reading of the text. In doing so, I ask students to articulate how they are constructing an understanding of the reading. Because this purpose for reading is often new to students, I model how I address these questions. I share, for example, how my lived experience as a multiracial person shapes my response to Baker-Bell’s (2017) chapter. When sharing my examples, however, I am careful to explain that we may not be able to identify a direct cause and effect relationship. There are occasions when we cannot identify why we have particular responses or when the intersectional nature of our identities obscures a clear cause and effect response. Identifying the source of our responses with absolute clarity or certainty, however, is not the aim. Instead, we attempt to identify these relationships so that we can understand how our responses are constructed by a range of factors—rather than inevitable or neutral. Ratcliffe (2005) explains that “[s]tanding under our own discourses means identifying the various discourses embodied within each of us and then listening to hear and imagine how these discourses might affect not only ourselves but others” (p. 28). Individually and collectively, we imagine the connections between our lives and our readings. During the individual reading and class discussion, I ask students to share tentative responses to this question, which allows us to learn from each other and about the constructed nature of reading.

## Why do readers make sense of the ideas in particular ways?

Ideally, the recognition that our responses to readings are constructed compels us to learn from others, particularly from readers who may construct their readings in different ways. To support this aim, I ask students to address the final question: “Why do readers make sense of the ideas in particular ways?” This question prompts students to identify any cultural logics that may play a part in the construction of their interpretations. During the independent reading and class discussion, this question allows students to closely examine claims in the reading—perhaps ones that garner emotional responses—and consider how those claims may function differently in different cultures. Through the process of rhetorical listening, students focus on the function of the claim *and* their response to the claim, as well as peers’ responses. In her chapter, for example, Baker-Bell (2017) claims that “[t]he belief that there exists a homogenous, standard, one-size-fits-all language is a myth that is used to justify discrimination” (p. 99). This can be a hard claim for some students, especially for students who believe teaching standard written English creates equity. Rather than getting stuck in a

conversation about whether Baker-Bell is right or wrong, this question presses everyone to consider how this claim might function differently for different communities of language users or different educational stakeholders. Like the second question, this question can be difficult to pin down. The work to address this question, though, provides the deeper understanding of self and other that rhetorical listening seeks. Listening to others' understandings also helps us understand how and why we might revise our understandings.

## Pedagogical Outcomes

The process that I have designed, one inspired by rhetorical listening, emphasizes accountability. Rhetorical listening posits that having a better understanding of each other helps us better communicate about the issues that impact us all. While there may not be a “right” or “wrong” way to respond to a reading, rhetorical listening is based upon the premise that we have a stake in each other's lives. We should listen to each other because our lives are interdependent; our choices impact each other. This emphasis on accountability makes us responsible for *how* we listen when we read a text. As we identify the ways our responses to readings are constructed, we become responsible for those constructions. My primary learning objective, then, is for students to recognize and grapple with the consequences that result from their constructions of readings. Such appreciation can support students' ability to discuss challenging readings for a course, but it can also support students' literacy development beyond the classroom.

In using and refining this process for 14 years in a variety of teaching contexts, I have observed three specific pedagogical outcomes. First, I have observed that making the constructed nature of reading visible through the practice of rhetorical listening repositions everyone in the classroom as a meaning-maker. All readers, including the educator, bring knowledge, beliefs, and goals to bear on a reading. As a result, the voices of all class members are important and valuable for deep exploration of the topic under discussion. While class participation is always a performance that is shaped by the dynamics of the classroom setting, this new purpose for reading reduces the need to avoid a reading or appease a teacher by offering a particular kind of response. This process allows me to communicate my desire to understand students' processes of engaging with the ideas in a reading, and I often notice evidence for this community building in class participation and final course evaluation comments. For example, one student “appreciated how close we were able to become as a class due to the way the class was structured.” Another student commented, “I love getting to hear my peers' experiences and ideas through the class discussions that we often get to engage in.” Students also thank me for the exploratory and problem-solving nature of our discussion by writing that the environment is “a welcoming, safe environment where pre-service teachers

can wrestle with their own thoughts and form their philosophies.” These representative comments express students’ perspectives on how this process creates a learning community.

Secondly, this process promotes critical self-reflection. Helping students “understand the role that their thoughts and feelings play...in making meaning,” can help students become more critically self-reflective about the ways their own ideologies shape their engagement with readings (Critten, 2015, p. 154). It can help students understand, in other words, how ideology always shapes the activity of reading. Some of my favorite teaching moments occur when students recognize the limitations of their reading experiences. This recognition creates a need to learn from others. Frequently, my students report sharing a reading that we have examined in class with a friend or family member because they want to understand how someone they care about constructs meaning from the text. Other times, students continue to seek out additional perspectives beyond their local communities. After one student rhetorically listened to Baker-Bell’s chapter, for example, she ordered the entire collection, *The Guide for White Women who Teach Black Boys*. As a white woman who planned to teach in a diverse setting, she recognized her need to learn from others with different backgrounds and experiences. In class, she explained how the practice of rhetorical listening revealed important gaps in her knowledge and perspective.

Finally, I have observed that this process can also support students’ self-efficacy. According to Bui (2017), students’ perceptions of a reading’s importance can be linked to students’ self-efficacy or their belief that they can learn from the material. Students can feel ill-equipped to publicly discuss the kinds of challenging topics that educators may want to explore. By providing a specific process for engagement with difficult readings, educators can support students’ abilities to engage with the reading and affirm the importance of the reading. As a teacher educator, I often notice my students’ appreciation for this process in their choice to replicate it with their students.

## Conclusion

While this process will not eliminate all pedagogical challenges—students can still have all the same defensive responses—I find that it creates a more productive space for working with the range of responses students bring to their study of challenging course readings. Because the process prompts an investigation into our responses, it values the emotion that students sometimes feel that they must hide from educators and peers. Enacting rhetorical listening is an important pedagogical tool for the occasions when students’ responses to the reading are central to the learning objectives. Of course, this means that educators who use rhetorical listening need to be open to these ideas. Rhetorical listening does not seek a particular

interpretation of a reading; instead, the focus remains on what happens when readers engage with readings. While classroom respect must remain at the heart of any productive learning space, exciting learning possibilities emerge when teachers and students have the opportunity to dialogue about the reasons why we engage with readings in particular ways. When we listen closely to each other, we can learn more about the beliefs, values, and assumptions that are central to engaging in conversations that matter.

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