Make Listening Visible

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Abstract

Online tutoring can make it hard to feel like tutors are engaging with students and actually helping them. Writing consultants can avoid feeling this way by showing the student they are actively listening. This paper will highlight some of the ways one can demonstrate active listening through backchanneling, gaze, and rephrasing student’s words. Improving active listening skills is a great way to foster engagement from the student and have more fulfilling sessions.

Key Words: Active listening, backchanneling, gaze, online tutoring
I remember my first visit to the writing center as a freshman. Like most students we as tutors encounter, I was reluctant. The idea of having to sit across from someone and look them in the eye as they critique my writing scared me. But, my English class required that I make an appointment, so I found myself sitting face to face with a writing tutor. My nerves ebbed when I saw the tutor was not a stodgy old professor armed with elbow patches and a red pen, but a fellow student. We began the session and my nerves completely diminished. Not only was the experience not as scary as I thought it was going to be— it was helpful! The tutor listened to my questions and concerns regarding my paper and addressed them. She made me feel less alone in the writing process. I left the session that day thinking, “Hey, this would be a pretty cool place to work.”

A year and a half later, I was completing my tutor training, eager to engage with writers and make them feel the same way I did after my first visit. I had read the tutor handbook multiple times, I had brushed up on the basics of writing, and I was ready to inspire my fellow students. Only… I didn’t feel like I was doing that at all. Most days, I felt like I was talking at a screen rather than engaging with a student. It felt like they could get the same experience from talking to Siri on their phones. I had decided that engaging with someone on the other side of a screen was impossible.

I was dwelling on this thought one day while preparing for an appointment. The student’s assignment was an application essay for a scholarship. He did not include any links or files for his drafts, so now, on top of my tutoring existential crisis, I was going into an appointment blind. No paper comments to help guide the session. I became even more nervous when I realized that I was tutoring someone whose writing was going to have a big impact on their life. This essay had
the power to help them save thousands of dollars and avoid a lot of debt. I was definitely feeling the pressure.

I admitted the student into the meeting and we started talking about his paper. The absence of paper comments forced me to better show I was listening to the student because I had no thoughts or ideas about his writing prepared. Showing the student I was actively listening to what he had to say provided encouragement to engage with me and that, in turn, spurred me to engage with him.

The problem with listening is that it “is a mental process: it’s really hard to see” (Santa 2). This means that a tutor can be listening, but the student may never know it. It becomes even harder to see this invisible process without the face-to-face aspect. Fortunately, Tracy Santa, the Writing Center director at Colorado College offers some tips that tutors can use to demonstrate listening. The first is called backchanneling. This is the process of uttering short verbal affirmations, such as “yeah” or “OK.” Many of us probably do so without thinking about it, but this can also backfire. Backchanneling can be a polite way for a consultant to show the student they are listening without hijacking the conversation, but it can also indicate that they are not really hearing what the student has to say. Sometimes we nod our heads or utter the word “yeah” while a friend tells a story, not because we are actually listening, but because we are bored out of our minds and just want the conversation to end. Obviously, we do not want the students who come to us feeling like we couldn’t wait for them to stop talking. I have had the best luck using backchanneling in moderation, and in tandem with Santa’s next tip.

Gaze is an important part of listening. It is “a signal of undivided attention” (Santa 6) that can show tutors are genuinely interested in what students have to say. When people look genuinely interested in what we have to say, we want to share more with them. This same
attitude can be cultivated in the students that come to the writing center through gaze. Eye contact over Zoom looks a little different than it does in person. In person, tutors could make direct eye contact, but we can’t actually accomplish this remotely without looking into the camera the whole time. No one expects tutors to do that— one of the best things about this job is getting to talk to people, not little black circles at the top of the computer. I make sure when I am tutoring to always be looking at the screen, my eyes never venture. If I do have to look away to refer to my notes or for some other legitimate reason, I make sure the student is aware of why I am looking away, and that they still have my attention.

Another tool I use in order to demonstrate I am listening is rephrasing what the student said to me, in order to show them my understanding. This was inspired by the session mentioned earlier, and I have found it to be a powerful tool in showing that I am listening. It not only proves to the student that I heard what they said, but that I processed it, which removes the invisibility around listening, and it serves to make sure both the writer and I are on the same page.

Practicing these techniques will help tutors better show students that they are actively listening to what is being said. Listening doesn’t have to be an invisible process. Listening can be demonstrated through backchanneling, maintaining gaze, and taking time to paraphrase the students words in order to check your understanding. Keep in mind, these tools don’t work for everyone— and that's okay! Everyone at the Writing Center needs to take the time to figure out which method works best for them and practice in every session. No matter the method, we as tutors need to be good at showing that we are listening; part of our job as tutors is to make the Writing Center a safe place where students can get help with their writing by being listened to.