

Listening Consciously: Hearing with the Intent of Understanding

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The reading that produced this week's discussion was [Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening*](#), a book that asks its readers to consider the rhetorical value of listening consciously to the beliefs and experiences of others. Ratcliffe calls this practice rhetorical listening, which "signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (17). In order to explore how this happens, Ratcliffe delves into the history of rhetoric, theories of identity, and strategies for listening to others rhetorically.

As a class, some issues we focused on were those of identity vs. identification, non-identification, invisible whiteness, and Ratcliffe's overall message for the field of Rhetoric and Composition.

Identity vs. Identification

Ratcliffe spends ample time discussing identity vs. identification. In class wondered if there was much of a difference between the two, and, if so, what was the significance? We came up with a few thoughts, but what resonated with me the most is the idea that all of our individual identifications are part of what makes up our identity. The significance of this lies in the fact that if we try to read someone based on one identification, we can easily lead ourselves to stereotyping. Because of this, Ratcliffe urges us to focus on non-identification as a tool for rhetorical listening.

Non-Identification

Because one can (even inadvertently) use identification to objectify people, non-identification asks us to see the whole person and to "admit that gaps exist" (73) in what we know about those we are listening to.

With a need to clarify non-identification further, we wondered, does a place of non-identification mean that one does not claim their marginalized identity? We considered how one goes about non-identifying. Through discussion we determined that maybe non-identification means you're not putting up barriers as the listener. It's, as one classmate said, "disidentifying yourself, not for the sake of yourself, but for the sake of what they're saying" because learning happens when we use "the capacity to hear" and feel the "obligation to listen."

We also wondered whether one can really be in a space of non-identification, especially if identification is not just how you see yourself, but how society sees you. After all, we're constantly being shaped by the concepts and tropes around us, and we also reproduce them.

Despite this, Ratcliffe seems to emphasize that all people need to search for understanding and connection with others. To develop understanding, those in spaces of power need to recognize unearned privilege, while also engaging in discourses other than their own. Rhetorical listening requires us to, as another classmate put it, "understand the context, but still make the choice to not let that context inform the relationship, the listening." By being accountable for our social positions, we can practice non-identification and aim to listen without objectifying others.

Invisible Whiteness

Ratcliffe's work makes it clear that not having to acknowledge race is a privilege. Often times in America, race may be invisible to white people, but it remains visible to non-whites. This invisibility of whiteness is something many don't want to discuss, but Ratcliffe argues that choosing to not discuss race isn't the answer. She makes it clear that avoiding racial discussions perpetuates the privilege of not having to talk or think about racial issues in our society. While some white people may feel uncomfortable discussing race, non-white people have to deal with the day-to-day realities of not being white, putting them in a position that forces the issue of race into their lives.

One classmate pointed out that "White people might not think of white in terms of a race category," whereas other races are seen as categories, "in silos, so to speak." One key idea that stood out to me is that Americans in the dominant culture often see their culture as "that's what America is," but it's only one view of the country. However, this isn't the case because, even if they think their life is the norm, Rachel reminded us, "everyone else has a qualifier in front of them." This racial qualifier is an identification often pushed upon people, one that often gets falsely equated with identity, rather than a single identification.

Implications for Rhetoric and Composition Studies

With this knowledge, Ratcliffe hopes that, first and foremost, we practice listening rhetorically, and discussing the gender and race issues that makes us uncomfortable. One person reminded the class that, "So often, when these issues are addressed, it's in a non-productive, narcissist way." The focus is on the self, not on society and others. By utilizing rhetorical listening strategies, we can work to avoid this self-centered trap.

Some strategies that stood out to the class included:

- Culturally grounding gender and whiteness by taking the time to define what those words mean in our classrooms and discussions. Rather than assuming terms are universal, we need to listen to the meaning that others derive from them.
- Eavesdropping, or listening consciously. This is a way to listen more carefully and purposefully, in the spaces we may not be used to hearing.

Rhetorical listening asks us to listen in spaces and ways we are not used to. We must spend time thinking through how we can responsibly and respectfully hear the words around us in order to move past dysfunctional silences and into a place of productive listening.