

# A Review of *Listening to and Learning from Students*

Deborah Meier

“LET THEM SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES AND may we listen,” Kevin Coval says in the final afterword to this excellent collection, *Listening to and Learning from Students*, edited by Brian Schultz (Information Age Publishing, 2011, 234 pp.). Of course, I’m prejudiced. I agree! As I often say myself—thinking about everyday classroom learning—“telling is learning and listening is teaching.”

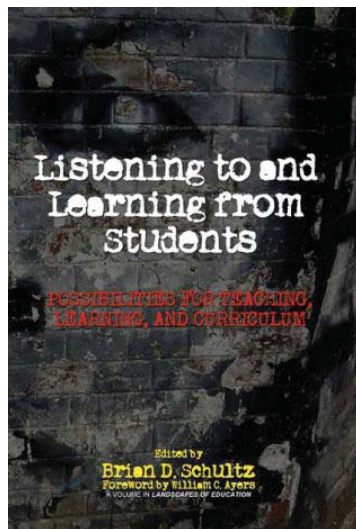
It’s a hard idea to put into action—and it’s of course not always true. I have listened with joy to—and still remember—speeches, lectures, and lessons given by important people in my life: Vito Perrone, Lillian Weber, Mike Harrington, Irving Howe.

But these names come to mind because I have been in the company of these people, who also listened carefully to me, with an occasional question, a nod, and a smile. That has been the story of my intellectual life. It happens even when I’m reading—as an adrenaline rush makes me long for someone to talk to about a passage I’ve just finished. I need to “talk it out” before it drifts away, before I’ve had a chance to own it and make it mine.

I also wonder: Is the way I turn an idea into my own true to the author’s intent? Does it matter? Yes, because it’s in the dialogue between us that the idea can not only become mine but also grow into something more than mine—by confronting the author or lecturer’s alternative interpretation.

From the beginning to the end, this book offers essay after essay that provokes excitement. Not each and every essay. There are 22 of them, after all. A few seemed pedantic, or at least too “academic” for my taste. Or perhaps they just interested me less.

I was particularly delighted with Bill Ayer’s foreword—in which he connects democracy to that absurd idea that “altogether we are each and every one somehow essential in the universe of democracy” (pp. xiv). The idea is precisely interesting because, of course, there are many times in the day when I can’t live up to that ideal. Brian Schultz’s “Listening to, Hearing and Learning from Students” follows Ayer by tackling our disappointment with



Obama, and does it in a way that intrigued me. He was challenging but less angry than I usually feel. It gave me pause to think about the advantages of his tone over mine. He also puts forth for reformers like me the challenging question of “sharing” authority with students—not just as a pedagogical style as we together try to puzzle over a difficult problem. But in truly making the “big decisions,” as he calls them, about the school itself.

What a surprise to find Caroline Pratt’s voice asking “What Is a School?” in the midst of these essays and to realize how much my own work owes to her. Her account of the cooking teacher who felt that letting the students “experiment with the flour and yeast, to see

whether they could make bread” would be wasteful hit home. It reminded me of the time I tossed all the little newborn plants when I returned to school Monday morning because they had not responded as they “should” have. The ones in the closet flourished and the ones in the window sill had died. She reminds me that she too has known the urge to put aside “pay” in the interest of serious learning.

Some of the chapters focus more closely on issues of social-justice teaching. Shira Eve Epstein notes how difficult it can be in these days of false accountability to confront issues of unequal power. The school itself is a potential laboratory for looking at

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power relationships, but it's also full of traps if a teacher is not very brave. Though a teacher and students might then examine how students in fact do exercise power—through resistance, sabotage, and boredom. Often this exploration takes place in the course of studying an issue confronting us in the larger society. But sometimes it means being explicit in uncovering the school's own power structure and making it open for discussion and critique—hard to do when test-prep curriculum takes over. L. Thomas Hopkins had me on the edge of my seat when he pursued the question about what is wrong here in his class of listless American history students. He got the answer: “You are a rotten teacher.” But his courage ultimately paid off for everyone. Would I dare?

The collection also includes a little bit of Pablo Freire, John Dewey, and Ralph Tyler, who, along with Pratt, remind us that this

discussion isn't new—it didn't even start in the ancient 1960s. The danger in which democracy is now threatened by an ongoing eating away of its core message, requires us to take up these issues among our pre-service students and education department colleagues (for whom this book is written) and also our K–12 students and their families. What's it all about? If it is important enough to “incarcerate” young people for 13–17 years—to take away five to six hours of their freedom every Monday through Friday—we ought to be able to enlist the beneficiaries of education as well. Is it enough to say, especially these days, “Stick with me and you will probably get a better salary . . . someday?” Or is it worth it because maintaining the tenacious curiosity that we are born with is essential to building a strong and safe democracy, not to mention planet?