

Just Listen...

by
Adam Ross

When I think of experiential learning, I think about a conversation I had last spring with my younger sister. She works in Special Education with the deaf and this conversation spurred me to use an excerpt from a book about Helen Keller. At the time I was having a hard time getting my GED and pre-GED students started writing. I remember the weather was so nice last spring that I wanted to get my students outside. I hoped that, if we went out, they would get inspired.

When I make up lessons, I'm usually trying to hit more than one subject. Here, I wanted to include social studies as well as language arts. So I found a reading selection on Helen Keller and some comprehension questions. I think the excerpt I used came from a U.S. history text. After we read, we talked about how different the world would be if we lived as Keller had, with no sound or sight. Some students asked why she didn't have laser surgery or animal eye replacements. Those comments helped us relate Helen Keller's situation to the period of time she lived in. Keller's story is a great way to point out the advances in medicine and technology. For me, her story is amazing because she lived at a time when there wasn't much available for her educationally. Students with disabilities then did not have the resources that are becoming available for students today, yet she

overcame her obstacles and became a hero. Educational opportunities for the disabled have changed dramatically in the last 100 years.

After the discussion, I led the group outside. Our community center is next door to an elementary school. The buildings share a common concrete playground near busy Washington Street in the South End. The students all picked different places to sit outside. First I asked students to block out all they could hear by thinking of something else. We did that for about fifteen minutes. Then I asked them to close their eyes and just listen. I asked them to pay attention to what they heard. After about fifteen minutes, I asked them to open their eyes and think about what they noticed. We spent about fifteen minutes just observing and then headed back to the classroom. On our way to the class I started asking the students questions about what we just did, and the conversation continued in the classroom. My questions to prompt thoughtful discussion were:

- What did you hear?
- What did you think about while listening?
- Once you opened your eyes, what did you see?
- Did you see things that you couldn't hear?
- Did you hear things that you couldn't see?
- Did you imagine a sound to be one thing and then realize that it was actually from something different?

Once students started sharing what they had noticed, I shared my experience as well. It was interesting to find that many of us heard things that many others of us did not notice. When students said that they noticed the same things, I asked more specific questions to generate more involved and exploratory thinking. A few students said they heard kids playing, so I asked them what sounds they heard that enabled them to distinguish that there were kids playing. This is when the students' answers got much more diverse and the conversation became more interesting. Some students said they heard high-pitched yells and shouts, others said they heard a baseball being hit, and others said they heard people running very fast. Some students said they heard car engines, others heard the brakes of a bus, and I offered that I had heard a manhole cover get run over. All these details led the students to the same discoveries, but each one heard

unique, detailed sounds.

After returning to the classroom, students spent some time writing. Overall, I was pleased with their essays. Although I want to have peer editing happen and I try to relate writing skills and grammar to their own writing, sometimes what they produce is so short, it makes it hard. If there are only four lines, you might not see the particular grammar point we just studied. On this day, the writing had an experiential quality. They got to experience something directly and then write about it.

And because of the discussions, their writing was more pre-meditated. They had more to say, and that meant we had more to work with.

If I were going to do the lesson again, I would organize it a bit better. I didn't write down the lesson beforehand or make my exact

objectives clear. I'd like to make clearer connections to other things we're studying. For example, Ann Sullivan, Keller's tutor, had her own story of emigrating from Ireland. There were class differences between Keller and Sullivan that would have been interesting to explore since we had touched on those topics before. I think it's important to talk about issues that make people uncomfortable. We talk about race and other loaded issues, so I wasn't afraid to bring up disabilities. I did worry that maybe I didn't have enough background on the Americans with Disabilities Act, but I went ahead.

I'm not sure how much more I could extend this lesson. A couple of students were pretty interested. Before the class a few students had some idea that Helen Keller was a blind woman. They had heard of her through some stupid jokes, but that was it. After reading, they were impressed. Some said they had more respect for people with disabilities. I remember one student mentioned that his uncle was either blind or deaf. (I forget which.) This student was one of the people who could communicate with his uncle pretty well. I remember he said in his writing that before he had viewed his uncle as normal, but that he came to see him as extraordinary.

So the lesson had many positive outcomes: It stimulated thinking about disabilities, it got students to write more descriptively and powerfully, and it gave us a way to talk about some changes that had taken place in the past 100 years. Talking about the lesson makes me want to do it again soon! •

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