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Listening Assignment (RD)

When I was first assigned this experiment, I thought I would end up talking to my dad about politics or religion or anything he has a strong stance about, and I did talk to him, at length, about the current candidates for president, as well as the recent controversy in Kansas with County Clerk Kim Davis. And while it did test my focus, and I fought to stay fully aware of what he was saying where I would normally have tuned him out to just let him rant for a while, he actually was not my greatest challenge in listening this week. My greatest challenge came in my service learning class. As this is my first service learning class, I am not aware if the other classes follow this framework, but the teacher assigns groups of students to teach articles we are assigned to read. Last week was my group's week to lead the discussion.

After explaining the general summary of the article, we moved into the first step of the discussion, which was to identify which parts of our identities--whether self- or societally-imposed--has had the greatest impact on us and has affected the way we see the world. One student raised his hand, and stated in quite the holier-than-thou attitude, that he considered himself "human", and that he believed that labelling ourselves and other people would only divide us, and that we should just stop using labels altogether so that these sort of constructs would not be used in the future. Especially, as he pointed out, as the world is moving towards a more homogenous future due to the lack of social constraints preventing interracial unions.

To me, this was rather problematic: I completely understood where his ideals were coming from. When I interact with people, the main thing I try to remember about the person is how that person interacts with others, not for where they were born or what kind of money they make. I don't see reason to build relationships built on certain labels. And these labels do only serve to divide us. However, I also see that each person, human as they may be, are incredibly unique, with their own experiences and identities, and those unique traits should be celebrated. Because that is what the article I was trying to teach was expressing, I took that side of the argument. If I had simply stood in front of the class and stated "Well, the author said this, this, and this, but it doesn't really matter because we're all human, and these dividing labels will only drive us farther apart so I refuse to use them to the extent that the author did," I would be preventing my classmates from learning the incredibly valuable lesson that was in the article that week.

I wanted to yell at him. I wanted to get into a full-blown rage fest in front of the entire class, and not even care. It was infuriating that he would say such a thing in such a tone, and at the beginning of my discussion.

But the moment I realized what he was saying, and I felt my brain beginning to shut out the rest of what he had to say due to the anger I had that he was saying it, I stopped. I could hear the lessons of active, empathetic listening playing through my head, and I fought with my desire to yell, instead managing to analyze what it was he was saying, and think about why I agreed or disagreed with it. He was expressing his opinion, and while I believed that his timing and his tone were wrong, I could accept that he was just stating where he was currently on the subject. I had thought those same things as well only a short time ago, and that made it much easier to

empathize with him, and I found that I was able to take a deep breath and calm down. Even after he finished, I took a moment to really think through my stance before responding. If I did this wrong, then all anyone would remember from my discussion was the argument, and I that was the last thing I wanted.

So after that moment, I responded, “I think those are important ideals, and I can see where you’re coming from, but I think that, in the world of today, those ideals do not hold up as much as you or I would like them to.”

And with that statement, I, unfortunately, had to end the argument. When he did talk again during the discussion, he was a little more open to helping to further the discussion, but I was unable to talk to him more after class. I am quite unhappy that I had to end the issue there, but I am incredibly thankful that we had so recently talked about empathetic listening and objectivity, as well as pointing out that losing control of one’s emotions will not help such a situation. Instead of making a scene with my answer, I was able to take back control of the discussion and help it to continue. The habits we talked about in class though really did help stop me from overreacting in the middle of class and making it a negative experience.