

In and Out – Active Listening

Learning Outcome: Students will become more aware of their classroom surroundings and learn to actively listen to whoever is speaking.

Summary: This exercise is quick to implement and can be used in nearly all classroom settings and during all classroom activities, including lectures and group work. The only required materials are the students' regular class notes and a regular post-it note pad. Active listening is enforced with this activity.

Procedure:

1. Discuss "Active Listening" and what it means. One suggested reference is the US State Department. <http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/65759.htm>
2. This exercise will focus on point #3 from this reference:
Give your undivided attention to the speaker. Absolutely important is dedicating your undivided attention to the speaker if you are to succeed as an active listener. Eye contact is less important.
3. Give students one regular-sized post-it note. Have them write "OUT" at the top center. Have students write "IN" on the top of their class notes page.
4. Class now proceeds as normal, with a lecture, group discussions, etc. When students are actively listening, they are taking notes on their "IN" page. If students find their minds wandering or find that they are not actively listening, they must write their extraneous thoughts on the "OUT" page. This will make students more aware of their classroom surroundings and illustrate to them when they are not actively listening.
5. Post-it notes are not collected or shared.
6. Summarize at end of class.

Outcome and Impressions: This technique was used at the beginning of the semester in a Freshman Seminar 'Biology of Food' course. With this technique, ideally, by the end of class, students will be writing on the post-it notes with less frequency. Students who are still writing furiously on post-it notes may need additional reflection. Though the technique was initially met with some resistance, most students in the Freshman Seminar course reacted positively and favorably to this exercise, felt it was successful in drawing their attention to the speaker, and indicated it helped them actively listen.

Additional Positive Experience: This technique was also applied during the "Human Microbiome" Freshman Seminar. The class listened as one of their peers read aloud portions of a chapter in our assigned book, and we all wrote on a post-it notepad the reason why we were distracted. Once a short section of the book (about 1 page) was completely read, the instructor asked the class to share how many times they had been distracted. This was a great experience, because the students could see that even the instructor can be distracted once or twice; and that it's important to recognize the distraction and to train ourselves to re-focus on the task at hand.