

The Art of Fruitful Conversation

Carol Nasr Griset and Kim Raymond

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“What is more splendid than gold?” “Light.” “What is more refreshing than light?” “Conversation.” (Goethe, “The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily”)

When we think of conversation, we tend to focus on what is said. On further reflection, however, we realize that listening is just as essential a part of conversation as speaking. A true conversation is a meeting of two individuals who together have the possibility of seeing something new arise from their understanding of one another.

The Role of Listening

When I am listened to, it creates me. (Brenda Ueland, “Tell Me More”)

At the center of the mentoring relationship is the encounter we might call the mentoring conversation. At the heart of the mentoring conversation is the art of listening. Why is listening the mentor’s primary responsibility? How does listening contribute to an individual’s creative process? What do I have to do in order to truly listen to another?

The way we listen enables others to speak. In other words, to actively listen means giving others the possibility of saying things that they could not otherwise have said – or could not have said in the same way. (Heinz Zimmermann, Listening, Speaking, Understanding)

Active listening to another is an act of love. It is a spiritual deed and requires courage, self-discipline and practice. Through listening, a mentor makes

herself available as a guide in the self-development process of the other. As listening mentors, we strive to create a fertile space within ourselves where the other's words may take root and grow. We open ourselves to them so that their unique way of being in the world and of caring for young children may flourish. We create a space for them to feel whole, valued and understood.

Listen to the new teacher. Listening is perhaps the most important thing you can do. Let the new teacher tell her story and encourage her in the telling. This is the story of preparation, questions, new ideas, struggles, concerns, worries. Be genuinely interested and try to resist the urge to tell her how you handled those problems or the temptation to sort it all out for her. And when you listen, listen; don't take notes. (Trevor Mepham, Teachers Helping Teachers)

Trust in the mentor will make it safe for the mentee to speak honestly. According to one experienced mentor, it is crucial that the mentor not have a "hidden agenda" in the conversation such as wanting to bring attention to a specific defect or issue that she thinks is causing difficulties. The mentor's attitude needs to be one of interest, and of not knowing what the other wants, feels or thinks. The mentor cannot assume or presume what the other will bring. This atmosphere of openness allows the mentee to be vulnerable in her feelings and creative in her thinking as she speaks. In turn, the mentor may hear something profound that she needed to hear at that moment, coming from the person being mentored.

If we concentrate our hearing until we are filled with the sound of another's voice, then an intimate encounter with the essence of the speaker can come about. (Zimmermann)

Attentive listening means we consciously work to withhold judgment and comparison. We withhold our responses, our thoughts and our expectations. In this process of holding back, we make space for the other and thus become truly available to them. We become aware that another's approach, though different from our own, does not necessarily need to be corrected or changed.

When asked what would be helpful from a

mentor, a new teacher said, "Before you make a judgment, ask us 'why did you do it that way?' Even though you may be more experienced, please remain open to our new ideas."

In committing ourselves to listen, we have a chance to dissolve old forms and prejudgments, to loosen ourselves from our thinking and acquire a different kind of knowing – that which comes through our feeling and willing – our impressionable receptivity. (Georg Kühlewind, Star Children)

... The mentor listens with all her senses. With her ears, she hears the words and tone of voice. With her eyes, she perceives the other person's eyes, facial expressions, body language and gesture. If we listen to another person as though to a piece of music we will get to know their "composing style" and give them space to express this style freely. Through deep, empathic listening the mentor becomes aware of the mentee's vision and how she is striving. The quality of the mentor's listening will draw out and confirm what the mentee already knows. The mentor observes and listens to ascertain the purposefulness in the mentee's decisions and actions. She may be able to encourage a gift the mentee may not fully appreciate in herself. For example, in listening to the mentee tell a story to the children, the mentor may see through an awkward presentation of the story to experience the mentee's enthusiasm and real gift for creating imaginative pictures in her storytelling.

Keen listening will allow the mentor to ascertain if the mentee is speaking out of her own understanding, or is borrowing from someone else. Perhaps the mentee is expressing what she thinks the mentor wants to hear; perhaps she is saying what she thinks she "should" be saying as a new teacher, or what she has heard other teachers say. With sensitive questions and empathy the mentor can guide the mentee toward authenticity, self-confidence, and true creativity.

The Role of Speaking

Improving our ability to converse means improving our ability to interact socially. We can give our partners-in-conversation opportunities to develop themselves, arrive at insights, find solutions and feel supported, or

we can use conversation solely to develop and validate ourselves. (Zimmermann)

With this in mind, a mentor's listening will inform her speaking. Through open and fully-attentive listening, our speaking will arise naturally as we seek to clarify what the mentee is saying. Our thoughtful questions will support the mentee in discovering her capacities and developing herself as a teacher.

In moving from listening to speaking, asking questions is most helpful when the questions serve to develop the themes brought forth by the mentee. Bringing an attitude of warmth and empathy to her questions, the mentor seeks to hear more about the mentee's ideas. We may be able to remember how difficult it can be for a new teacher to express intentions and impressions to a seasoned teacher.

Remember not to patronize. The new teacher is intelligent, skilled, inventive, sensitive, and she may have something to teach you. Draw ideas and possibilities out of her through questions and observations and don't give easy answers. Have the tact to let her discover her own answers. (Mephram)

As mentors, we may need to remind ourselves that in order to understand another, we "stand under" them with a respectful and learning attitude, remembering that it takes years of teaching to discover one's own style and learn to be comfortably oneself with the children. Else Gottgens, a long-time mentor, says, "Before I go into a teacher's classroom, I first remind myself to look for something which that teacher can do better than I. What can I find to truly admire in the other adult?"

Establishing a Relationship and Asking Helpful Questions

Building a relationship with the mentee is a prerequisite for having a fruitful conversation. Early in the mentoring process, the mentor will need to ask the mentee, "What do you want, hope for, and expect from the mentoring relationship?" We can then clarify, if necessary, how we see our role as a mentor.

Both mentor and mentee will find it helpful for the mentee to complete a self-assessment before the visit. This should include self-perceived areas

of strength and weakness, and any concerns the mentee has in her work. When asking the mentee to prepare such a self-assessment prior to the visit, the mentor may help the process by asking the mentee to consider the following:

"What part of your work gives you the most joy and satisfaction?"

"What do you find especially difficult?"

"What are your priorities for this year?"

An experienced mentor suggested that if something is hard for the mentee, the mentor can encourage her to narrow down the area of difficulty. For example, if the mentee is challenged by circle time, the mentor may help her pinpoint the challenge. The mentor can begin by asking what parts of the circle go smoothly. From an awareness of the mentee's strengths, the mentor can better help her approach the problem.

It is important to ask open questions that encourage the mentee to become more conscious of what she already knows. A mentee is likely to appreciate questions that focus her awareness. During the mentoring visit, such open questions might include: "What do you think are your strengths?" and "In what ways have you grown since you started working with young children?" In helping a mentee to clarify her communication with us, we may offer a comment such as, "Let me see if I understand what you are saying." Then the mentor may reflect back as clearly as possible what she has heard. Clarity will enable the mentor to validate and support what the mentee is expressing.

In helping the mentee to reflect on the day, the mentor may find questions such as the following useful: "How was the morning for you? What parts of it do you think went well? What parts of the morning were most challenging?" In supporting and respecting the growth of the mentee, a mentor might need to guide her away from labeling or blaming a child or parent in a difficult situation. A mentor may be able to offer a new approach that focuses the mentee on what positive actions she might initiate to help resolve a difficulty. The mentor can help the mentee to expand on her self-observation by asking questions such as: "Can you tell me more about that? Can you think of any way you might be contributing to the problem? Have you thought about a possible plan of action?"

By asking the mentee to describe the areas where

she feels most competent, the mentor acknowledges her abilities and reminds her of why she has chosen this work as her vocation. In addition, by allowing her to talk about her challenges, the mentor creates the opportunity for the mentee to place her pride, vulnerability or embarrassment into the chalice of conversation.

Additional Aspects of Conversation

There is another kind of conversation to pay attention to during the mentoring visit: the daily exchanges the mentee has while she is working. How is the conversation between teacher and children; the conversation/relationship between teacher and assistant; and the conversation/relationship between the teacher and the parents? Are the children being heard and are the children hearing the teacher? The mentor will be looking for the quality of these “conversations” even though they may sometimes be non-verbal. Is it a fruitful exchange, and is there understanding? Does the assistant feel acknowledged; do the parents feel appreciated? What is the quality of the exchanges between the mentee and the people she relates to every day?

A mentor may be asked for help with the mentee’s relationship with the parents of the children in her class. She may suggest that the mentee approach the teacher-parent relationship as one would approach a conversation: that is, by setting aside pre-judgments and expectations and offering an open and empathic atmosphere for an exchange to take place. The mentor may remind the mentee of the importance of fully-attentive listening when interacting with parents, so that she may experience with them, as she does with the children, the love that grows out of interest. The mentee may need to be encouraged in embracing and respecting the parents’ central role in their child’s life. It can come as a surprise to a beginning teacher how much of her work will be with parents. Mentors can have an important role to play in helping new teachers find ways to include parents in the life of the class. Occasionally, the mentor may be asked to help the mentee plan a parent evening. By active listening and reflective feedback, a mentor can encourage the mentee’s enthusiasm and help her focus her plans for sharing her ideas and observations with the parents. The mentor’s experienced perspective is valuable in this area and can serve as a reminder to

the mentee about how much she can learn from the parents.

Sometimes a mentor may enter into a mentoring relationship with an experienced teacher who is resistant to feedback or deeply entrenched in particular patterns or habits of relating to young children. The mentor may then approach more deeply the intention behind the teacher’s actions, asking, “What is the thought behind the action?” She may pose the question to the teacher, “What are your reasons for doing it this way?” “Is it having the effect you hoped for?” “Have you ever considered trying. . . ?”

Occasionally a mentor will encounter a mentee who is wondering if she should be pursuing teaching as her career; or the mentor might have this question. It might be helpful to inquire about the mentee’s biography and why she chose to enter the field of teaching. The mentor may help the mentee perceive if she is experiencing a temporary difficulty or if a bigger question exists for her. This situation calls for honesty and tact from the mentor. A question such as, “Does teaching nourish you as a life’s work?” may be helpful.

Some Practical Considerations

Just as the children’s activity is nourished by a healthy environment, the mentoring conversation is affected by surrounding circumstances. Is the setting private? Is it quiet enough to allow for focus and concentration? What time of day is it? Are the participants hungry, tired, or needing a break? In some teacher education programs, it is the mentee’s responsibility to ensure that the conversation is given the necessary respect within the framework of the day so that a fruitful exchange can take place. In this case, the mentee will be expected to attend to the practical details of arranging an appropriate setting as well as allowing for adequate time. For example, the mentee might need to schedule a substitute to cover for her if she has afternoon faculty duties. One mentor noted the difficulty of conducting a mentoring conversation while sitting at a picnic table on a windy winter afternoon during the mentee’s playground duty.

Sometimes the planning may be the responsibility of the mentor. The mentor will be prepared to ask the mentee to “make time” for the conversation during the school day. Eating lunch

together after a morning observation may help the transition into a more relaxed conversation. Ideally, there would be some time between the observation and the conversation to allow both to collect their thoughts and digest the morning's experiences.

If the mentee has an assistant, or is an assistant, meeting for half an hour with both individuals before meeting alone with the mentee, can be helpful. In this way, the mentor has an opportunity to ask how the morning went for each of them, separately and as a team. By creating an atmosphere of trust and empathy, the mentor gives each a chance to speak openly about working together. If there are struggles between the two, the mentor can normalize or provide neutral ground to the struggles between teacher and assistant, likening them to the struggles in any close relationship. She may need to affirm how important it is for the children to experience an atmosphere of respect and caring between the two. The mentor may need to help the pair to have realistic expectations of one another and of their relationship.

It often helps to put a mentee at ease if mentor and mentee are able to socialize outside of the mentoring conversation. They may have a meal together or take a walk, or the mentor may stay at the mentee's house. The casual time that mentor and mentee spend together outside of the classroom in an informal setting may lead to expanded or enhanced conversation and deeper understanding of one another. If the mentor stays at the home of the mentee, she may have the opportunity to meet the mentee's spouse or family and gain a greater awareness of the mentee's life situation. This broader perspective will allow the mentor to offer a greater depth of support, compassion, and encouragement.

The passage of time is a mysterious element in the mentoring relationship. The quality of conversation will change as mentor and mentee come to know one another. As trust develops, conversations will ripen and yield more insight. Another aspect of time the mentor may notice is that often it will not be until the next day or the next week that the significance of a question or comment will surface. The mentor may find an opportunity to mention these insights or ask additional questions in a follow-up phone conversation or visit.

Qualities to Cultivate; Additional Thoughts

Through the ages, people have sought wise counsel from those who are more experienced. As a listener, a guide, and a mirror, our role as mentor is profound. Foremost for the mentor is facility in the art of communication. As experienced teachers, we come to the mentoring role with a wide variety of skills and an abundance of gifts to share. In order to be truly effective in aiding the self-development of the other, we have a responsibility to hone our communication skills through workshops and study. Often a mentor can spend much time and energy in conversation with a mentee and wonder if there was a positive effect. It may be helpful for the mentor to create a way for the mentee to give feedback regarding the mentoring experience. Such feedback could be sent to the mentor and/or initiating body. This information could provide valuable insights for the mentor's self-evaluation and bring to light aspects of the mentor's listening and speaking that need more awareness.

It is worthwhile for the mentor to review the balance of listening and speaking after a conversation, and to ask herself about the quality of connection. "How was the understanding between us?" As mentors, we need to develop the self-knowledge that informs us whether we should learn to listen more or to speak more. What is our natural tendency and how do we cultivate the other capacity? A mentor must be able to practice reflection on her own motives, strengths and weaknesses, asking, for example, "How do I respond to criticism or praise?" Our ability to be helpful as a mentor is grounded in who we are and who we are striving to become. If we remain open to the possibilities for growth, mentoring has the possibility of transforming the mentor as well as the mentee.

This chapter began with the quotation from Brenda Ueland, "When I am listened to, it creates me." As mentors, let us strive to cultivate the capacity to listen in a way that makes this thought a reality.

Carol Nasr Griset has taught young children for fifteen years and now mentors for Rudolf Steiner College and for LifeWays. Kim Raymond has been involved with Waldorf education for over thirty years, for the past six years teaching at the Haleakala Waldorf School in Maui.