

# The art of listening in the age of AI

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## Abstract

Listening is essential to student learning. But how can instructors build practices of listening into their courses? This article makes the case for adopting a listening-centered approach to university instruction to subvert the dominant “transmission model” of education. It also provides an example of how such an approach can be implemented in practice. Specifically, I present the “plague narrative,” a reflective writing assignment modeled after Thucydides’ account of the plague of Athens in 430 BCE. The plague narrative gives instructors the opportunity to listen to students’ experiences and to learn about their needs and situations. The exercise also offers students a relatively “low stakes” opportunity to engage in political theorizing and critique. Instructors, if properly focused on listening, can use this assignment to better understand their students while helping them make sense of contemporary political life. I conclude by considering how this assignment can disrupt the forces that might push a student to rely on generative AI tools and instead encourage them to use their own critical thinking and writing skills.

## Keywords

COVID19, listening-centered pedagogy, plague narrative, political theory

## Introduction

In this article, I present a listening-centered approach to university instruction as a way to subvert the dominant “transmission model” of education. Listening is essential to student learning. From the earliest moments of formal schooling, teachers assess listening comprehension. Here, listening is understood as a passive act of receptivity on the part of students. This perception carries through to higher education. And in the case of

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the university classroom, the listening most often elicited is one-sided: students listen to the instructor to receive the knowledge she is imparting.

I argue that in forgoing the “transmission model” of education we can begin to see classroom listening as a dynamic, two-way process. Specifically, I consider the value of incorporating formal opportunities for instructors to listen to their students. Such efforts support student learning by allowing professors to tailor instruction to meet students’ needs. These efforts also help instructors recognize students as whole people with full lives outside the classroom. What’s more, I posit that speaking or writing to *be heard* rather than merely to *be assessed* can have a transformative effect on students, helping them discover intrinsic motivation for learning and classroom participation. Developing this intrinsic motivation can have several potential positive downstream effects, including lowering the incidence of cheating and reliance on generative AI tools.

After outlining the limitations of the transmission model and the comparative benefits of a listening-centered approach to teaching, I propose a writing assessment through which instructors can formalize their efforts to listen to students. Specifically, I present the “plague narrative,” a reflective writing assignment modeled after Thucydides’ account of the plague of Athens in 430 BCE from his account of *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*. In this assignment, students narrate their experience of the early COVID-19 pandemic. The essay is used as a “diagnostic” tool, allowing students a low-stakes opportunity to get early feedback on areas of growth for writing.

Rather than having students communicate course content back to the instructor, the goal of this assignment is for students to express themselves in writing on a topic on which they are the sole authority. The essay allows instructors to listen to their students, learn more about them, and directly support their learning by providing substantive feedback on their writing. I discuss how instructors can shift the focus away from the grade and toward holistic feedback that demonstrates they have listened to the student.

Instructors, when properly focused on listening, can use this assignment to better understand their students while helping their students grow as writers and as members of their political community. The assignment succeeds at one of the key goals of higher education in politics, helping students make sense of contemporary political life. I conclude by considering how this assignment can disrupt the forces that might push a student to rely on generative AI tools and instead encourage them to use their own nascent critical thinking and writing skills.

## Listening and the transmission model of instruction

In their volume, *Subversive Pedagogies: Radical Possibility in the Academy*, Schick and Timperley (2021: 2) present strategies for subverting the dominant “transmission model” of university instruction. As they explain, the transmission model imagines a student as simply “a mind to be filled with knowledge” (Timperley, 2021: 109).

This approach to university instruction has its limitations. For one, students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. Instead, they are embodied people with unique perspectives. Their experiences necessarily interact with course material, changing the way students understand and process it. Furthermore, even if students were empty receptacles ready to receive course material, the material itself is not made up of

easily digestible nuggets of information. Learning is a complicated and dynamic process involving interactions between students, instructors, and the material itself. This is especially true in political theory where the ideas we encounter in the classroom “are not the equivalent of pre-sliced bread waiting to be jammed into our mind-toaster” (Scudder, 2020b: 513). “Cramming,” in the sense of cramming nuggets of information into students’ heads does not accurately describe what goes on in a political theory classroom. Learning occurs more in the mode of “excavation,” whereby students unearth and evaluate normative commitments that were always there, perhaps just under the surface.

The limitations of the traditional transmission model become even more apparent in the digital age. Consider, for example, that the content covered in our courses is widely available to anyone with access to the internet. Relaying key disciplinary insights may have been the most important function university professors served in centuries past, but the digital age has ushered in a new era of information access. Today, complex concepts can be synthesized by large language models. Long and complicated texts can be summarized in bullet points, and recordings of the “sage on the stage” can be shared with a new crop of students, all without the participation of the professor herself. Ironically, a continued commitment to the transmission model of education only makes universities *more* vulnerable to obsolescence given recent technological advances. If, however, we dispense with the transmission model, recognizing that the content shared by instructors is just one piece of the puzzle, and that students are not our customers, but our partners in learning, the emergence of generative AI need not spell doom for the future of higher education.

The future of higher education is much brighter if we focus on engaging with students in a collective process of critical reflection. The critical thinking skills fostered by this pedagogical approach endure long after the substantive content has been forgotten or superseded. Dispensing with the transmission model of education, we come to see the importance of having a dynamic exchange *between* an instructor and her students as well as among the students themselves. Recent work in deliberative democratic theory, has demonstrated the need to understand how messages are received and taken up, and not just how they are expressed, or transmitted, and by whom (Scudder, 2020b). By appealing to recent work on democratic listening, we can begin to see an alternative model of instruction. I argue that adopting a listening-centered pedagogy can help us, as political theorists, better understand and facilitate a more dynamic process of learning.

The listening model of instruction has three main advantages when compared to the currently dominant transmission model. Though not always stated explicitly, the transmission model of education assumes listening occurs in the classroom; it is through listening that students receive the knowledge presented by the instructor. The first advantage of a listening-centered model of instruction, however, is that it acknowledges that listening is a two-way street, or more accurately, a large intersection with traffic flowing in several directions. Crucially, instructors, need to listen to students as much as students need to listen to instructors. This understanding of listening as an exchange and not merely a one-way street, is important for educating the whole student and seeing them as embodied learners.

Second, recent scholarship on democratic listening shows us that listening is a dynamic process that binds listeners and speakers together. Listening is more than simply

receiving a discrete message that has been “transmitted.” The quality of listening influences what messages are shared in the first place. Third, listening is not just a means to an end, it is an end in itself. Drawing from the listening act theory that I develop elsewhere, *in* listening to our students we recognize their equal moral standing Scudder’s (2020a). The experience of being heard can have a transformative effect on students, helping them see the intrinsic value of political education, and recognizing the worth of their academic efforts beyond the grade.

Understanding listening in the classroom as a dynamic process occurring between multiple parties, including the instructors themselves, can help us overcome many of the limitations of a transmission model of classroom instruction. The transmission model of university instruction has several key components, namely (1) a professor who transmits or shares (2) a pre-fixed body of knowledge to (3) an ever-changing group of students. There is one thing that *always* changes from semester to semester: the students. While the student dimension is constantly changing, the other two dimensions—the professor and the underlying body of knowledge—often do not. There is a general assumption that courses can and do remain generally the same despite the ever-changing student body.

Consider, for example, how veteran instructors might talk about their teaching load. It is common to hear references to a new or old “prep.” An old “prep” is a course that you have taught before. The assumption is that once prepared, the material is appropriate for a near-universal audience. But there is no one universal frame of reference that university students share. The universal student does not exist. When we act as if it does, when we assume our course content will travel across time and place and between classrooms, we allow a particular model of student—for example, one who is right out of high school, single, without dependents, and not otherwise employed while pursuing their studies—to stand in for the rest. This faulty assumption can hinder our actual students’ ability to learn.

Thus, one benefit to adopting a listening-centered pedagogy is that it recognizes the particularities of the students in our classes *today*. Beginning each semester by listening to our students and by inviting them to share their own stories, we expand the transmission model of education and make space for genuine exchange between students. Now an ever-changing group of students can share their unique perspectives with professors who can customize discussions of course material according to what they learn. Furthermore, communications research shows that listening is not just a passive act of receiving what others say. When sharing a story, speakers will alter the content of their narrative based on the quality of listening from their partner. The very stories speakers share are shaped by “an interactive, dyadic process with both conversation partners contributing” (Pasupathi and Billitteri, 2015: 72). Given this dynamic quality of listening and speaking, formalizing moments of instructor listening can foster robust and productive dialogue in the classroom. Formalizing listening on the part of instructors serves as an invitation for students to share.

As I will show with the example of the plague narrative, an instructor’s early investment in listening can pay dividends as students become more committed to the course. This is not about demonstrating an understanding of any specific concept; instead, it is about getting to know the students and encouraging them to think introspectively, beginning the excavation work that is political theory. Demonstrating an interest in students’

ideas lays a foundation for the rest of the semester. This is true even—and perhaps especially—when a student’s contribution betrays deep confusion.

Here, I am reminded of times when students (myself included), butt up against the walls of intelligibility, and struggle to put even their questions into words that others can understand. In such cases, listening would not result in understanding *per se*, let alone learning. Yet, the best teachers make sure to take up and engage with unintelligible inputs, if only in the sense of interpreting them as evidence of confusion and the need to return to the text or re-explain certain material. These moments are going to be different each semester, as a function of the different students in each class. Given the dynamic quality of listening, however, students may not feel comfortable sharing these inchoate thoughts unless an instructor has already demonstrated an interest in listening to them.

These kinds of classroom discussions are admittedly quite difficult and frustrating in the moment. They can even lead some students to shut down or give up. I find, however, that having opportunities for students to share reflections, even if not directly related to the specifics of course instruction, can build up a kind of muscle memory that students can use later in the semester when they are doing more traditional political theory work rooted in argumentation and textual interpretation. Thus, institutionalizing moments when instructors listen to their students early on can help avoid premature disengagement.

Incorporating a dynamic practice of listening between students and instructors ensures that students are heard. Being heard is an end in itself. When we engage with students for the sake of listening to them (and not just assessing them) we can help them capture a spark of intrinsic motivation for engaging with the course. As I will show, developing this kind of intrinsic motivation can have several positive downstream effects, including reducing incentives to cheat and rely on generative AI tools.

## The plague narrative

In this section, I will present a writing assignment used in a first-year college seminar as an example of how to institutionalize dynamic listening *between* an instructor and her students.<sup>1</sup> In August 2020, I was preparing to return to in-person instruction after having quickly shifted to online learning in March 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I would be teaching a writing-intensive course in Purdue’s Integrated Liberal Arts Program: Cornerstone. The program is designed to introduce non-liberal arts majors, many of whom are majoring in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields, to the liberal arts through “Transformative Texts.” The course is capped at 30 students and fulfills students’ written communication requirement. While not a politics course, *per se*, I approach the course through a political theory lens. The theme of the course was “Sacrifice, Responsibility, and Citizenship.” The course was made up of first-year students who had just moved to campus amid a deadly pandemic. They were making perhaps the biggest transition in their lives from high school to college, from living at home to living on their own. During this transition, they were asked to wear a face mask at all times, except when alone in their private dorm room with the door closed. Despite the uncertain circumstances, we were happy to be together after months of being forced apart.

It was in this context that I designed a new writing assignment, “The Plague Narrative.” I added selections of Thucydides’ *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians* to the syllabus (2013: 118–124). Together, we read his account of the horrific plague that struck Athens in 430 BCE. Thucydides recounts not only the physical symptoms of the novel disease, but reflects on how his society endured the disaster. He describes people who took advantage of the desperate times and others who acted selflessly to help others at great risk to themselves. As he explains, “No one’s constitution was proof against it, regardless of their strength or weakness, but it swept them all away, whatever kind of care and treatment they had received” (Thucydides, 2013: 121).

After reading Thucydides’ brief discussion of the plague, students were asked to write a 3-page “plague narrative” of their own, describing their own experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had begun just 8 months prior. When introducing the assignment, I asked students to imagine that their narrative would be read by people 2500 years in the future. We discussed the value of their unique perspectives. Given the global nature of the pandemic, every single one of them was touched by COVID-19. I invited them to reflect on what aspects of their experience were particular to them, and which might have been more universal.

This assignment was motivated by my desire to integrate this pivotal experience into the classroom, to help students make sense of how the pandemic had upended their lives. Students enjoyed the assignment because it was directly pertinent to them. Having students offer a kind of political theory interpretation of a life experience allowed them to practice the tools of the trade on a subject of which they are already experts. They were familiar with the “text,” as the text was their own life. In fact, there was no greater authority than themselves on this subject, which they were now invited to interpret.

The exercise, thus, offered students a relatively low-stakes opportunity to engage in political theorizing and critique. As Schick and Timperley (2021: 3) explain, “the academy is firmly rooted in Euromodern ontologies and epistemologies, which results in a privileging of particular voices and ways of knowing and relating.” Such a narrow view of what is and is not worthy of serious academic study can have a negative effect on students and the discipline itself (Schick and Timperley, 2021: 3). Calling on critical scholars to “unsettle the dynamic of the knowing academic and receptive student” encourage professors to “explore alternative possibilities for sites of knowledge production” Schick and Timperley (2021: 4). This is precisely what the plague narrative did. The student became the authority, as they were narrating their own experience.

Additionally, the plague narrative gave me the chance to listen to students’ experiences and to learn about their needs and situations. Providing scaffolding for the plague narrative, I asked students to “think, pair, share” in response to in-class reflection prompts. Students were provided written feedback on early drafts. Of course, this was a very difficult time for students. Building the assignment around ancient parallels afforded students a valuable critical distance through which they could assess and process political life in their own time and place. Engaging with the papers also changed my perspective as I approached the semester. Among other things, listening to my students’ stories showed me the value of in-person education, which each of these students (having opted into in-person instruction) craved. It motivated me to make the most of our time together each week.

By inviting students to reflect on the pandemic and institutionalizing an opportunity for them to be heard, I tried to encourage them to engage more deeply with the course content. Seeing the relevance of course content to their own lives can be transformational, leading to deeper understanding for students. Timperley (2021: 109) writes that being encouraged to apply course readings to her own life outside of the classroom helped her “[retain] that learning for far longer than I have in those classes where content delivery was the primary goal.”

The goal of the assignment was for students to show off their writing style and analytic voice while reflecting on their own experience. Again, they were the substantive experts on this topic. Having them write about a topic on which only they have authority gave students the confidence needed to experiment with writing. Substantive feedback from the professor, regarding how they might explain their ideas more clearly was an integral part of this assignment. In the next section, I will explore how the opportunity for students to express themselves *and be heard* through listening-based assignments might be able to subvert the disruptive power of generative AI tools, showing students the limited value of these shortcuts.

## **Reflective writing and disrupting the appeal of generative AI**

In the preceding sections, I discussed the reasons why we might want to subvert the transmission model of education. Independent of these reasons, however, the transmission model has already been subverted first by COVID-19, as Schick and Timperley (2021) note, and now again by advances in generative artificial intelligence (AI). With COVID-19, instructors had to redesign assignments for a hybrid or asynchronous setting. For example, in April 2020, I created a “deconstructed final exam” for students to take from home, on their own time, as they worked through course material at their own pace. Demonstrating “fluency” with key concepts was prioritized over recall.

In the first half of 2023, another major shift occurred in the classroom. Large language models went online, upending how many instructors approach writing assignments. Ironically, many of the changes we made to accommodate the disruption of COVID-19 (e.g., open-book, untimed, take-home exams) are less attractive in the age of generative AI. Generative AI tools and large language models can generate sophisticated text that, while not perfect, often satisfies the basic expectations of university writing assignments. Plagiarism detectors are no help, as the output of these chatbots is “original” in that it does not appear anywhere else. Of course, they are not original in a true sense, being derived from the whole body of knowledge amassed throughout history and stored on the World Wide Web over the last 3 decades.

In the second half of 2023, university faculty and administrators on my campus began having conversations about how to approach learning in the age of generative AI. Underlying these discussions are questions about how to prove the value of a liberal arts education in the first place. Why do students need to learn how to write, if a generative AI tool can “produce” a “better” paper than many of our students? Strategies have emerged to help faculty deter and detect the use of chatbots in student work. These

include tweaking our approach, moving (back) to in-class assignments and making use of AI detection software.

Heartened by my experience with the plague narrative assignment and informed by my listening research, I propose a different approach. Rather than spend time trying to detect the use of generative AI tools in my regularly programmed assessments or to deter their use by giving only in-class assignments, we can rethink the assessments themselves and reimagine the kinds of assignments and modes of assessment that will support student learning in a ChatGPT world. Given the new tools available to students, what does an effective writing assignment look like? It is in this context that the full value of the listening-based plague narrative assignment becomes clear.

The plague narrative focuses students on the goal of interpreting and sharing their experience to a receptive listener, in this case the instructor who is not immediately trying to assess the students' learning. By putting listening at the center of the assignment, the plague narrative disrupts many of the incentives that would lead students to rely on shortcuts for producing their written work. First, the plague narrative relies on students' personal experiences. The opportunity to not only reflect on an experience but to be heard by their instructor motivates students to write in their own voice. Second, the assignment downplays the formal assessment of the essay. This can be done in a variety of ways. For example, instructors can allow students to revise their work, reducing the grade pressure students feel when turning in their paper. Alternatively, instructors can use the paper as a diagnostic essay, focusing on substantive feedback but not having it count toward their final grade. Lastly, if empowered by their position at the institution, instructors can make the paper (or the course as a whole) "ungraded."

Recent writing on the pedagogical value of "ungrading" or "contract grading" wherein students either do not receive a grade or receive a grade based on either the completion of various assignments or on their self-assessment, have shown how grades can backfire as an incentive for learning. For example, "when comments on papers are accompanied by grades, students disregard our comments—often not even reading them and certainly not using them to improve or learn more deeply" (Blum, 2020: 3). Grades "place the focus on extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation, and encourage strategic performance ('How little can I do to still get the grade I want?')" (Schultz-Bergin, 2020: 175). Removing grades as the central focus and replacing them with the goal of being heard, can disrupt the imperative to rely on AI or other shortcuts to elevate writing above a student's present ability. The advent of generative AI presents, to my mind, the strongest reason to date for moving beyond traditionally graded assessments.

So long as grades are the focus of assignments, making use of the best tools available for writing assignments will always seem like a reasonable path for students. Having an ungraded reflection assignment, on the other hand, can disrupt many of the pathologies of grades that lead students to write only for the grade. Removing the formal grading can also free up professors' time, allowing them to better demonstrate having truly 'listened,' by providing more substantive written feedback.

I used to say that there are two ways to get a B+ on a position paper in my political theory courses. The first path would be for students to write something basically true, and uninteresting, but in a technically good way, with proper formatting, punctuation,



clear prose and organization. This paper would look the same from one semester to the next. It is easy to grade and often follows the model laid out in the rubric. The other way to earn this grade would be for a student to write something creative, edgy, maybe not completely successful in its attempt to persuade, but showing careful and original thought on a subject. In the latter case, the writing may not be technically sound, but the student goes well beyond the class discussions to make something new, to form an original thought, in their own voice, and to push the conversation in a new direction. This paper would not look like anyone else's paper. Here, the student *shows* that they have learned, instead of telling us what they have learned. In the age of generative AI, the first kind of essay is hardly an accomplishment. And my appreciation of the second kind of essay is greater than ever. We need to encourage students to write the second kind of papers, the creative ones, the risk-taking ones that allow them to engage in critical thinking. The plague narrative can encourage precisely this kind of approach by reducing the emphasis on a formal grade.

Like Marx's views on the alienation of labor under capitalism, we can see how grades alienate students in their pursuit of knowledge. Departing from those who would interpret workers' avoidance of labor "like the plague," as evidence of the need for wage incentives, Marx (1978: 74) flips this logic on its head. Our capacity for free-productive activity is what makes us human. Our alienation from this act, as evidence by our shunning it when possible, proves the corruption of capitalism. Though not explicitly, proponents of ungrading make a similar point by arguing that grades as an incentive for learning undermine the intrinsic value that students can find in education. Moreover, when grades are the goal, cheating is always a good idea so long as you don't get caught, and generative AI tools make it increasingly easy to avoid detection.

The strategy that I have outlined here involves acknowledging the appeal of generative AI. Rather than ban these tools outright, we ought to lessen their appeal. We can do this by decentering grades and reminding students that learning, growth, and improvement over time ought to be their goals. Ideally this will encourage students to avoid taking shortcuts that undercut learning and critical engagement. Grades "incentivize the wrong stuff: the product over the process, what the teacher thinks over what the student thinks, etc." (Stommel, 2023: 28). In contrast, the plague narrative assignment especially when used as an ungraded or even a "diagnostic essay" invites students to express themselves, to process an important moment in their lives, and to work on their writing skills along the way.

The assignment also helps challenge the idea of a "neutral" observer commenting in a "objective" fashion on a particular political topic or issue. In the assignment's very existence, it teaches us to embrace our subjectivity. It begins from the assumption that the material is shaped and interpreted by the person who engages with it. There is no one way to write an effective paper. Once students are not worried about demonstrating they received a "transmitted message," they can write honestly. Professors can listen to them and facilitate learning throughout the remainder of the semester. When listening is the goal, not the grade, students are invited to see the true value of their writing: to explore their thinking on an issue, grapple with others' ideas, and take a position: all things that AI cannot do for you.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how listening can be used as a pedagogical tool to subvert the transmission model of university instruction. By recognizing listening as a dynamic, multi-directional practice between students and professors, we can improve our students' learning. The plague narrative writing assignment can help instructors institutionalize listening to their students in their politics classes. Listening to our students allows us to tailor our courses to meet the particular interests and needs of our students. As I have shown, this assignment encourages students to engage in a robust way with the material by placing expression and engagement above evaluation.

Importantly, however, inviting students to share is risky for them. As Timperley (2021: 122) explains, students "may feel invited to be vulnerable without having the same power to protect themselves." These kinds of practices require us to consider "the ethics of relationship building and the vulnerability that ensues" (Timperley, 2021: 122). As such, it's worth considering whether it is ever possible to create a "safe" space for students to participate in self-reflection and even political theory. One way to make this kind of engagement less risky or even just to acknowledge the risks involved is by not grading the assignment at all. By inviting students to reflect on their own lives and decentering the grade, we can bring about a deeper level of engagement in our courses and even potentially disrupt the incentives that currently exist for students to rely on generative AI tools.

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## Note

1. While the example I use here relates to our varied experiences of the COVID19 pandemic, there are other narrative assignments that could work as well. For example, after reading Plato's *Apology*, I have asked students to write an account of whether they live an examined life.

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