

In my last blog I explored what Krista Radcliffe calls “Rhetorical Listening” as a possible method for approaching training tutors. One of the recurring themes I encountered was the difficulty of consciously working to identify and correct for bias and what it really means to listen openly, that is to be open to other people’s ideas, perspective, and interpretations and let them impact me. I thought that my next blog would be about a series of essays that further supported that research, but instead, I am taking a detour. As I was working on this assignment my son and my Godson, both seven-years-old and both on the autism spectrum, were failing to communicate their needs to each other and it erupted in a battle with a wiffle ball bat and fishing net. The other children observing this broke it up and tried to explain to both of them that they actually wanted the same thing, to go fishing at the lake. However, both of them failed to really listen to the other and because they communicate differently from each other and both have trouble seeing past their own perspective, things quickly escalated. So, for this blog post, I am taking a detour and exploring a different but related question, that is, how do you get people to acknowledge that other people experience the world differently?

KM: Can people ever really understand others’ point of views of the world? Is it possible for us to put ourselves in another person’s shoes having not lived their experiences?

DM: So, I think that there can be something in the middle where we can at least try to step out of our notions and grapple with how someone else sees things.

TH: Would that be empathy? Empathy is still a lens which we would look through.

DM: Taylor, it could be. Some people are good at empathy and some people may just be able to listen more fully. I can offer an example from my son. He cares deeply about others, sometimes too much, but he cannot identify other people’s feelings beyond anger and he even has trouble then. So empathy is something that might not be achievable for him. He can, however, be taught to listen with more detail and to listen more before responding.

TH: very good point. I didn’t think of the fact that not everyone is good at empathy.

In the TED Talk, *The danger of a single story*, Nigerian Novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shares how single narratives can be limiting or even harmful especially in understanding others -- or those we view as “other.”

*So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books. I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, ... All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out.*

*Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to...*

*What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to*

*have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.*

Chimamanda's account reminds me of how people often misunderstand my son. I have been told that my son doesn't look like he has autism or "are you sure he has autism? He speaks so well." Most people's concept of how autism "looks" is the stereotypical behaviors portrayed in movies like *Rainman*. Despite more than a decade of information campaigns that aim to educate people that autism occurs on a spectrum, hence the reclassification of Autism disorder to Autism Spectrum disorder (DSM V) fixed stereotypes of people with autism as non-verbal wards of the state with no skills. Dr. Stephen Shore, an advocate for adults with autism is credited with coining a now common phrase in autism circles, "when you have met one person with autism you have met one person with autism." This is often used to broach a conversation about the vast differences among the neurodiverse, including people with autism. As an autism mom and someone who speaks frequently about neurodiversity, I lean on this phrase often. I think this can be extended to how we talk about all subpopulations or even all students. It is important that we recognize our students and tutees for their unique skills and contributions.

I personally identify as neurodiverse, I work with people who are neurodiverse as do most people, we just don't always acknowledge this difference when we talk about how we train and relate to others. The simple acknowledgment that people understand things differently is key to open communication. I often tell my son that he needs to be open to the idea that, "people understand and experience the world differently." And while writing centers use fishbowls, which are mock tutoring sessions to train other tutors, those fishbowls themselves can perpetuate stereotypes about students with disabilities, neurodiversity, or language difference.

DK: How so?

DM: One example would be that the general advice given when working with English Language Learners (ELLs) is to have the tutee read their work aloud. However, this can make some tutees very uncomfortable. They may be stronger at reading and have trouble pronouncing words in English, especially if they are an international student is new to interacting in an English dominant environment. Also, when any reader is grappling with pronunciation it will be difficult to listen for other things in their work, and generally the goal with a read-along is that the tutee can hear their mistakes in syntax and even word patterns. Furthermore, students might not feel comfortable having their work read aloud in the center at large. It can be a very busy place.

Scenario building, a practice where tutors use tutee requests or tutor accounts of sessions to construct sessions using best practices can help a little, but it is still easy to fall into common tropes and perpetuate stereotypes which limit tutors capacity to serve and understand students. Like rhetorical listening, this too highlights concerns for me but poses more questions than answers.

DK: Such as?

DM: How can scenario building or post-session wrap-ups be constructed so that they encourage tutors to move out of their comfort zone? What parameters are needed to avoid the tropes that are typically conveyed in fishbowls? Can student feedback somehow be incorporated into this process? (We have an existing survey.) Does our current list of fishbowls and scenario building lend itself to being built out? Who should do that - administrators, tutors, both collaboratively? Should SJICR, the OODR or another stakeholder be involved? Tutor committees are slated to work on language diversity and inclusion statements should this be incorporated into the discussion of tutor training?

It is not feasible to train tutors or anyone without modeling and examples of how they will work and time constraints limit how many models can be shared. That said I am committed to making sure that tutors don't think there is one single story or one single solution in tutoring writing.

KM: How did the TED Talk help you understand the population of tutees better? What are some things you can reflect on about the population after having an eye-opening moment of reflection?

DM: Adichie throughout the TED Talk offers examples of how limited views of other cultures or even ways of knowing affect how we understand other people and convey messages. It is not that it was eye-opening but that it reminded me how this type of thing is pervasive and unconscious in our lives. I think that more models and tutor-tutor sharing could be a start.

TH: there's a lot of parallel between that point and what we were discussing in issues in comp earlier tonight. Did our discussion about translanguaging affect your perspective?

DM: Yes, it was what guided me as I read Ratcliff. How to incorporate cross-cultural communication and the shared burden of communication are central themes in her discussion of rhetorical listening. I also think this could inform tutors in that translanguaging asks tutors to respond to tutees where they are at and respect how they choose to use language, but yet still offer help with the constructs and rules of language with the tutee deciding when that will happen. This requires the tutee to follow verbal and non-verbal cues from the tutee.

KM: How will you make sure tutors understand the tutee population is diverse?

DM: Tutors already know this. The tutors themselves are diverse in many ways and we talk about this often. I think what I can do is remind them how our own experiences can interfere or cloud communication and that responding in a way that opens communication and helps the tutee and tutor develop an authentic dialogue is key.

DK: To be a bit rigorous here: it isn't just raw experience. We interpret each experience, and we do so according to narratives and categories we have inherited. Consider that any experience you can talk about already and always is framed by a context and purpose and audience and is never just an "experience."

DM: That is fair. And the totalities of our experiences do frame how we interpret communication. I think that can be good but also at times limiting. At least in what I understand about the framework of Rhetorical Listening. Also, some tutors have much richer cross-cultural

experiences and others not. I'm not suggesting that tutors not use their frameworks at all, just that they also see where they can be limiting too. And perhaps when we identify a perspective or experience that is different than our own we ask more questions or listen deeper so we can build our lenses.

TH: Did this experience change you as a tutor or teacher?

DM: So, I am aware of learning difference as a student, tutor, and instructor. I do deploy various strategies to try to differentiate instruction and sessions, however, what I am learning is that much of it is based on my experience as a learner and the same sets of checklists that are popular in training manuals. This can be limiting and not apply to all students. As an instructor, I can design assignments that allow students to express how they construction ideas and write in different modes or using different tools. As a tutor, if it is one-time appointment this a bit more challenging but something that I would like to explore more. Typically when students come in for a one-time session they have an assignment they need help with and 30 or 60 minutes to produce something tangible, so there is limited time to explore what the student means when they say, "stuck" or "they don't get it", tutors who are pressed for time usually infer based on their past tutoring experience and fishbowl models how to proceed next. More back and forth between tutor and tutee could build more understanding but at the expense of less work produced in session.