

It Pays To Listen

Why Empathetic Listening Matters in Entrepreneurship Education

by Lesley Hetherington

My answer to this question lies in a deeply held conviction that everyone deserves the opportunity for a good work-life balance. I don't mean lounging on a beach twenty-four-seven while running an online increasing returns business, however appealing that might sound, but rather doing work that is engaging and rewarding, both in terms of motivation (a sense of purpose) and economic return (being paid reliably and well). This implies an ability to identify what is really needed, wanted, and valued by others, with enough clarity and certainty to identify customers and market segments and articulate a clear value proposition to a selected audience.

As I see it, part of the responsibility of an entrepreneurial educator is to enable the student to recognise,

own, and develop their talents, and discover how these can be used to create value for others.

My Story

This story focuses on teaching and developing the ability to listen empathically, in order to gain insight and understanding of the other person's experience and point of view at a gut as well as conceptual level. Once mastered, this skill underpins many aspects of effective entrepreneurship, including understanding customers (and hence opportunity recognition and market segmentation), working with others, and building social capital. Empathic listening also provides a foundation from which it becomes much easier to treat everyone within the enterprise ecosystem with understanding and respect. The ability to treat others with respect enables the building of social capital and social reputation. This can be developed as

Definitions

Empathic listening

means paying attention to another person with empathy (emotional identification with their experience, compassion, feeling, and insight). One basic principle is to 'seek to understand before being understood'.

(William Huit - www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/process/listen.html)

Books

a valuable entrepreneurial capability, which is just as relevant for enterprise sustainability as evaluation of the business economics and numbers. In the early stages of business startup (from idea through to pre-start, early stage trading, and breakeven) business is usually built more on relationships, trust, and interpersonal skills than on overall economics. Empathic listening is a highly valuable, largely unrecognised and untaught piece of the overall challenge of building entrepreneurial capacity and talent. Empathic listening provides a valuable starting point to explore the nature of effective selling, and why sales is such an emotive area for so many people and a block to business start-up and development.

Why Teach Empathic Listening?

When I first began teaching entrepreneurship, my main student cohort was of postgraduate science, engineering, and technology students, studying at Masters and PHD level. Within this student body, the students were generally uncomfortable with taking marketing decisions. They found marketing to be intangible, lacking the grounded logic and evidence of their core disciplines. Understanding customer value and taking decisions around human resources, recruitment, and people management were seen as highly risky. These students were able to put forward sound propositions for the application of their chosen technology, but struggled to uncover the level of insight that would enable them to differentiate market segments. Most of their opportunity recognition and market research involved creative brainstorming (divergent thinking) as to the many possible reasons why someone might buy their offering, but failed to identify clear criteria for eliminating options from a specific customer perspective. This meant that many projects failed to progress through the required stages, from opportunity recognition and accessing resources to managing the growing business. They were still stuck in the opportunity recognition stage.

I needed to find a way to support these very intellectually capable students to actively engage with marketing and sales, and have the confidence to select a target customer, develop pathways for sales, and grow the business. They also had to be able to work up the technology adoption cycle, beyond the initial 'false positive' of technologists selling to technologists due to a shared love of technology, to recognise the market intelligence value of early adopters, and to understand (and hence overcome) the different mindset and requirements of an early majority market. I needed a way to get over the 'human beings are difficult' hurdle.

My solution was inspired by both the work of Stephen Covey (see readings) and my own experience running competence-based assessment centres for Toyota, in which we unpacked complex competencies into their component parts in order to assess them. I decided to actively teach



Covey, S.R. (1989) *The 7 habits of highly successful people*. New York: Fireside.



Rosenberg, M. (2003) *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life: Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships*. Encinitas: PuddleDancer Press.

students the skills of empathic listening, taking a process-oriented, progressive approach to explaining the steps that underpin the skill.

I introduced empathic listening as a specific skill that would provide a route into more insightful interviewing and primary research, and positioned this as underpinning deeper understanding of opportunity recognition, accessing resources, and developing the growth enterprise. The initial challenge for the students, once they had acquired the tool-set, was to identify a potential high-value niche in which their technology would deliver customer satisfaction.

Learning Aims and Outcomes

The learning aims and outcomes for the empathic listening workshop are for students to:

- Understand and recognise the steps of effective empathic listening.
- Identify the behavioural barriers to empathic listening (e.g. probing, advising, telling their own story, evaluating), and be able to overcome them.
- Identify the personal, internal/mindset barriers to empathic listening (e.g. concern with their own performance, wanting to impress, be liked etc.).
- Use the process of active listening to uncover insights into another person's perspective, feelings and behaviour.
- Recognise whether empathic listening is working effectively or not.
- Experience empathic listening from the three perspectives of listener, listened to, and observer, and hence have a tangible, personal experience of the power of empathic listening and its value in understanding others.
- Relate this skill to the practical challenges of identifying customer needs and making early market segmentation decisions.

The Learning Experience

I wanted my students to have a learning experience that was:

Student-centred

In order for them to experience the effects of empathic listening, both doing and receiving, in a context that was real and relevant to them.

Flexible and transferable

Allowing them to see for themselves the relevance of this skill to other aspects of their lives, including as a valuable skill for researching and understanding enterprise and entrepreneurship opportunities, to experience the power of the listener and their mode of listening in and determining the nature of a conversation and what is uncovered.

Stretching and confidence boosting

To encourage students to stretch themselves and achieve something that they didn't believe was possible in a time-constrained setting. This tends to reinforce positive self-belief in their capacity to develop powerful new skills and learn quickly and effectively.

In order to achieve this, I needed to give all students the opportunity to experience the process in action, from each of the three perspectives of being listened to, listening, and observer. I wanted them to experience communicating differently, being heard, and objectively listening. I wanted there to be sufficient iteration within the exercise for skills development and the power of practice to be appreciated, without the activity becoming 'boring'. The aim was for students to leave with a first-hand, real-life experience of the value of empathic listening as an achievable and valuable skill, and probably with some insights into their habitual listening behaviour.

I needed to use the class time to experience the impact of the skill, rather than stopping for a theoretical understanding of the concept. I introduced the subject in workshop format, with:

- Live demonstration.
- Briefing on the process, a little theoretical background, and recognition of different listening styles.
- A practical listening exercise in groups of three, rotating the roles of listener, storyteller, and observer, so that each student had taken on each of the three roles.
- Feedback on the activity, Q&A.
- Reflection on the application of the material beyond the class, both for themselves and for their enterprise project.

The practical aspect of the workshop was structured with a briefing for each of the three roles:

- The storyteller, whose task was to tell the listener about a real (but minor) challenge that they had recently faced.
- The listener, whose task was to simply listen, as though they were living the incident in the shoes of the storyteller. Their job was to reflect back the storyteller's feelings about the situation, but to express this in their own words (i.e. challenging them to understand the experience, not memorise the words).
- The observer, whose job was to spot, on behalf of the listener, any of the specific, non-empathic listening behaviours of evaluation, probing, advising, or telling their own story, and to record the impact of these on the storyteller.

At the end of the practical activity, there was a group debrief covering what had worked, what hadn't, what was easy, what was difficult, and any personal insights gained during the exercise.

The final part of the workshop was a discussion of how this process could be used in real life and entrepreneurship.

Having introduced empathic listening as a practical activity early in the course, it is then reintroduced through specific enterprise activities throughout the programme, depending on the overall context of the course (e.g. for qualitative research in opportunity recognition, or for resolving problems with employees in accessing resources).

The main assessment vehicle used were reflective learning diaries, for which the following structured guidance is provided:

Why use the specific tool?

What is it? How is it used?

What would happen if it was used effectively?

What would happen if it wasn't used?

I have used reflective learning logs in different ways, but the most effective has been to use them as a week-by-week record of a course, requiring the student to report on and up-load their learning every week. This also reinforces learning while the experience is still fresh.

Lessons Learned

I have taught empathic listening for over 15 years now, in various formats and to students from undergraduate to PhD level, as well as to staff active in entrepreneurship education, coaching, and mentoring. It is one of the simplest and most impactful skills to teach, because the experience of being truly heard is usually quite profound for the person being listened to. You know when you are getting it right, because the facial expression and body language of the

Mini Case - Empathic listening

Empathic listening provides an interactive way to support students to identify possible market segments. We start by getting the students to select a single everyday object or service. As a fall-back, select an object that is readily to hand (e.g. a pen, or a mobile phone). Ask the students to brainstorm under what conditions this object would be really valuable (even life-saving) to them. Collect all the answers on a flip chart or board (divergent thinking). Then, get the students to eliminate the easy answers and explore the improbable or impossible options. In groups, taking turns role playing customers with such a problem, use empathic listening to understand the real value of the product (the object) to the customer. Repeat the role-play step at least three times. During the role-plays, make a note of what the customer says about feelings and context. From this collected data, identify how the product would be used, how many times it would be used, how frequent-ly, and what the impact of having the object would be as

well as the negative impact of not having it. At the end of all three role-plays, identify the context in which there is the most extreme need for the product, and the case which has the most repeat occurrences (convergent thinking). Identify the monetary impact of the value of having the object, and the monetary loss of not having it. Put together a quick pitch for the product, using this format: 'Our context was ...', 'The most extreme value of the product was x, when y occurred', 'The most frequent use was for x, when y occurred.' If you are short of time for pitches, these can be recorded as posters or uploaded to a class blog page.

Students tend to engage with the impossible challenge. It provides a context where mistakes don't matter, as there are obviously no 'right' answers. This makes for a fun and often laughter-filled session.

"Helped me better understand myself and communicate more effectively."
Empathic listening workshop participant



speaker visibly changes. They often open up further, and tell you even more about the situation. You don't have to be perfect. If you are going in the right direction, the person being heard will guide you. It is a skill that everyone seems able to develop, and teaching empathic listening is a great way to develop the skill yourself. Its impact is independent of gender, age, and professional background. It is a great ice-breaker, and promotes active discussion and reflection.

You need to be willing to share your own experience, and your mistakes. Often, the first stage for the learner is to

become aware of their unconscious incompetence as an empathic listener: to realise how often we listen only to identify our opportunity to reply, contribute, correct, or impress. Iteration is essential in order for deeper understanding to develop. The recognition that the empathic listening process is effective and can be applied, but that it will take practice, is a very valuable and satisfactory outcome for this workshop.



Resources

To find out more about empathic listening, please search for 'listening' in our online compendium of learning materials. To get you started why not take a look at the following videos:

Empathetic listening, Stephen Covey

The video is the official introduction to empathic listening, presented by Stephen Covey, and provides a clear and sound platform on which to build empathic listening skills.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eal_itxjT68&sns=em

The Indian talking stick, Stephen Covey

The Indian talking stick provides a way in which empathic listening can be used more formally in a group session.

This is a follow up on the first Covey video, and provides an introduction to developing more listening activities.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUXi-Zc45tA&sns=em>

The basics of non-violent communication, Marshall Rosenberg

This video provides a background to non-violent communication, why it is important, why it needs to be overtly taught, and the value of developing the skill. It has an abrupt cut off, as it is taken from part of a longer session. Non-violent communication is linked to empathic listening and provides deeper perspectives and more tools and techniques.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-129JLT-jkQ&sns=em>

“It brings the opportunity to step into the other persons shoes in order to understand their meaning, allowing a deeper level of human communication and freedom from imposing our own judgement”

Enterprise Programme Manager



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I'm an educator, mentor, and consultant, with over 15 years working specifically in entrepreneurship education, designing University programmes and business workshops to develop entrepreneurial competence and confidence. From 2010- 2014, I was Director of Enterprise and Entrepreneurship skills at the University of Aberdeen, developing entrepreneurship education practice and developing programmes between the Business School and the School of Education. From 2000 -2010, I was an Entrepreneurship lecturer at The University of Strathclyde and Programme Director for the MSc in Technol-

ogy Entrepreneurship. I currently mentor on the PGDip Entrepreneurship Programme at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge. I'm a Biochemical Engineer by original discipline, working on water treatment plant design for international markets, especially Egypt. I have worked in industry, manufacturing, marketing, and co-owned a consultancy practice. I currently deliver workshops across the UK and Europe, and have taught empathic listening in the UK, Bulgaria, and Italy.



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