

Listening and Responding to Students

Personal Reflection and Professional Development Ideas for Teachers

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Teachers and programs may want to work further with the ideas in Heather Lash's article (pp. 46-48). *On this page*, we have compiled real-life student/teacher interactions that we think will help spark reflection and discussion for teachers working alone or in groups. Add your own scenarios. Consider the merits of other responses. *On our website*, <www.nelrc.org/changeagent/extras>, you will find a second piece (by Lenore Balliro) that explores how it can be beneficial for teachers to learn more about students' countries of origin. Use these pieces on your own or in the context of professional development to explore how, as Lash suggests, we can treat our students as people who are as complex as ourselves.

What happened	Teacher response
<p>A student wrote a very detailed description of the female genital mutilation that was performed on her. When she brought it to me, she was near tears.</p>	<p>After I read it, I was near tears as well. I told her she was brave to write about it and asked her what sort of feedback she wanted. She said she wanted me to help her with the grammar. It felt challenging to swallow my own emotional reaction and help her with comma placement, but I felt it was important to give her what she asked for.</p>
<p>A student talked about her experiences as a child during the war in El Salvador. She said she doesn't usually talk about it because she gets tired of people's horrified expressions.</p>	<p>I realized I had exactly that horrified expression. I thought about how tiring it must be for her to deal with other people's reactions to her tragedy. When you sit there looking horrified, you draw attention to yourself. I wondered how I could be a more neutral but compassionate listener.</p>
<p>I brought a newspaper article about a Cambodian women's health project into my class to read with my students. They got excited because there were words in Khmer for midwife, etc. Then they started asking me for the English words for miscarriage, abortion, etc.</p>	<p>The lesson took a completely different turn from what I planned. It made me realize that by starting with something my students knew about and were genuinely interested in, they could begin to trust me enough to ask for information they couldn't find in textbooks. This sensitive subject had to come from them. I taught them the English words for abortion and miscarriage, and also added other words for birth control, anatomy, and sexual vocabulary.</p>
<p>As a new teacher with a beginning level ESL class, I used the graphic of a family tree to teach vocabulary of family. This activity was extremely painful for one woman who lost her children in her war torn country.</p>	<p>I sat with the woman and had her include her babies in the family tree with the symbols of hearts instead of a notation for deceased. I realized that what seemed to be an innocuous lesson was filled with emotional triggers, and I had to do a better job thinking through my students' experiences before creating lesson plans.</p>