

Linda
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Listening and asking questions

What immediately struck me on reading the extract from the Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez article is just how few questions I ask these days, particularly in my working life, that I have forgotten what to ask and how to ask it, and as a consequence I have difficulty listening.

This comes as a bit of a shock to me because as a lawyer I am trained to ask lots of questions designed to elicit the facts; which are then applied to a set of rules (legislation and/or caselaw) which in turn determine the relative merits of a case. Often what is lacking from this fact-finding process is any real analysis of the nature or effect of the questions asked. In essence I tend to ask questions that I believe I already have (or can anticipate) the answer to, the effect of which is to reassure myself that I possess a certain legal knowledge, and that by the practical application of that knowledge, I am changing things for the better. But in a way this is a kind of self delusion, because once I strip away all the legal jargon, I'm not sure that I have really 'heard' what the client has been telling me at all – in other words I haven't really been listening (even to myself). If I haven't really been listening then what gives me the authority to advise or guide or act on someone's behalf, and how will I be able to measure the outcome? (other than in terms of the obvious success or otherwise of the case).

Moreover, if I am forgetting how to ask questions and listen to my clients, then I am certainly not asking the right questions of my peers and supervisor(s), and consequently I doubt that I am really 'growing' in my practice.

The Freire article has been helpful in making clearer to me what he refers to as the "undeniable relationship between being surprised and asking questions, taking risks and existence". Somewhat reluctantly I see myself as one of those 'intellectuals (who are) almost afraid to take risks, to make mistakes' albeit in the knowledge that 'it is the making of mistakes which enables advances in knowledge to be made'. However, I write this on the eve of taking up a new position in a different Firm, so for me these readings have been timely – I hope that the new position is an opportunity for me to learn to listen differently, both to clients and to myself and to be more conscious of the questions I ask.

Writings on Community

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What are some of the issues associated with listening to a community?

Community can be defined as a group of people who are in some way connected to each other for example by their locality (geography), by their race or ethnic origin, by their religion or faith, by their sex or sexuality, by their profession or interest. One can also feel part of communities by way of a shared a sense of belonging to, or identification with, histories, art, politics or experiences. One's experience of community can begin with the personal i.e. family or immediate locality, but can also branch out in ever widening circles to encompass international (human) experiences.

One of the difficulties associated with listening to a community arises when we consider who is doing the defining, i.e. who has identified the group as a 'community' and for what purpose. At one end of the spectrum people can be defined for official purposes in terms of their responses on a Census form, by age or marital status, whereas others come together to form communities around common concerns or interests. Even within self-defined communities the group is unlikely to be homogenous, so what can be said about the group as a whole could be problematic.

Sometimes others seek to define me as being part of a community that I personally do not identify with, e.g. according to my profession. More often my own experience of community is nostalgic – looking back and remembering past times when people came together over shared values or experience or goals that may now be considered trite or irrelevant.

Ideas and characteristics of communities change, and what constitutes the 'common thread' of a community also changes. (The Trade Union movement for example has seen significant changes since Thatcher)