

Dewey and the Creative Potential of Students' Listening

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Drawing on John Dewey's vision of growth as an open-ended process that is continually staring anew, this paper examines how student-initiated inquiries can enhance engagement and understanding by navigating the dynamic interplay between listening for the expected and listening for the unexpected. It is suggested that students listening for the expected temporarily halts exploration, providing an opportunity to consolidate understanding and create stable foundations for further explorations into the unknown. In contrast, students listening for the unexpected can expand the subject matter into new contexts, allowing topics to resurface in unforeseen ways. This form of listening is taken to encourage dialogue to venture beyond established boundaries, sparking novel connections and serendipitous insights. These two forms of listening are mutually reinforcing: Listening for the expected requires a willingness to engage with the unknown, allowing students to collaborate with others in a dialogue to test and refine their comprehension of the subject matter. Conversely, listening for the unexpected requires a grounding in the expected, serving as a reference point for assessing how far off the beaten path exploration can diverge. Although the tension between the two forms of listening can sometimes lead to uncreative outcomes, this tension is also integral to fostering students' growth and an aesthetic sense of connection to subject matter.

Introduction

Listening plays a central role in communication, yet its creative potential is largely unacknowledged in educational contexts. This paper proposes that students' listening should not be reduced to a tool for passively absorbing information within what Dewey (1899/1980, p. 22; 1938/1991) labeled traditional education, but as a creative force that dynamically reshapes the direction of inquiry within an open-ended educational dialogue, facilitating growth through continuously reengaging with subject matter from divergent directions. This notion of growth, for Dewey (1916/1985b, pp. 152–153), is not about reaching a fixed endpoint but about expanding and sustaining exploration through collaborative inquiry, where each experience informs and conditions the next, and allows students to become attuned to nuances, complexities, and variations in experience. In putting students' creative listening at the center of educational dialogue, teachers can help students extend their engagement to others and foster inclusive participation in the exploration of a subject matter. In these co-created inquiries, there is an opportunity to meet through the subject matter and be attuned to the nuances of others' contributions to honor multiple viewpoints. Such educational culture fosters space-making instead of space-taking, helping students invite quieter voices in and helping to distribute participation more equitably (Kibler et al., 2021;

Waks & English, 2017). This paper will argue that students' listening can play a vital role in cultivating educational dialogue that allows for such exploratory, open-ended, and relational engagement with subject matter, thereby supporting deeper inquiries and the unfolding of richer educational experiences. Within this framework, students' listening emerges not as a passive act of knowledge acquisition but as a dynamic and inquisitive mode of engagement that continually reconfigures the student's relationship with the world.

This paper assumes that student-initiated openings into a subject matter are central to realizing Dewey's vision of growth. According to Dewey (1916/1985b, pp. 152–153), the educational process has no end beyond itself; it involves becoming increasingly capable of revising and redirecting one's interactions with the environment, a process inherently dependent on the continual act of beginning anew. Dewey (1938/1991, p. 25) thus championed experimental, provisional, and recursive beginnings that expand inquiries into new aspects of a subject matter rather than narrowing the study of a subject matter to a linear march towards predetermined outcomes, thereby risking abandoning explorations of subject matter before it has been meaningfully engaged with or fully explored. As such, I will argue that the true potential of student listening lies in fueling new inquiries and experimentation, repeatedly sparking questions, redirecting discussions, and keeping the exploration alive.

Deweyan Conceptualizations of Listening in Education

Before exploring the ways in which students' listening can be characterized as creative in the exploration of subject matter, and to situate my argument within the broader field of Deweyan educational scholarship, I will first provide a brief review of relevant academic work on Deweyan approaches to listening in education. While speaking has traditionally been prioritized over listening in research on or about educational dialogues (English, 2009, 2023; Haroutunian-Gordon & Waks, 2010), scholarship informed by Deweyan philosophy reflects a growing interest in the pedagogical potential of listening. The literature portrays listening as both an emotional and cognitive process (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2010; Rud & Garrison, 2007; Waks, 2007, 2010). On one hand, it is affective and non-judgmental, fostering empathy through the suspension of preconceived notions. On the other hand, it is rational and reflective, involving critical engagement with the speaker's ideas based on existing knowledge. For example, Jim Garrison has explored the concept of listening as a transformative act, emphasizing its creative nature through the suspension of established categories. This approach facilitates empathetic understanding, spiritual healing, and collaborative democracy. Garrison (1996) underscores the importance of being open to others and engaging in dialogues across differences. He argues that such listening acknowledges the suffering of others and opens possibilities for healing and transformative communication (Garrison, 2010).

English et al. (2025) introduced the concept of *pedagogical listening*, which encompasses various forms of teacher listening in response to students' struggles, particularly in mathematics. This framework includes established listening approaches such as *supportive listening*, which fosters peer collaboration (Hintz & Tyson, 2015), and *empathic listening*, where teachers remain open to students' viewpoints by suspending preconceived judgments (Waks, 2011). Waks (2011) explored Dewey's distinction between one-way and transactional listening, emphasizing the latter's role in fostering cooperative friendship and a democratic society, and highlighted how transactional listening can promote a more engaged community within educational settings. Another listening approach within the framework of pedagogical listening is *educative listening*, which helps students transform challenges into opportunities for reflective learning (English, 2009). English underscores the importance of being attentive to students' difficulties in exploring subject matter, incorporating moments of tension where listening to students' struggles becomes a catalyst for reflective learning. *Self-reflective listening* is another listening approach that prompts teachers to reexamine their assumptions and teaching practices in response to students' challenging remarks (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2010). Finally, the framework includes *generative listening*, which stimulates

inquiry and supports the co-creation of new ideas (Yackel et al., 2003). Yackel et al. (2003) described this form of listening as part of the teacher's role in facilitating mathematical understanding through well-designed instructional sequences and feedback. These investigations into listening have recently been extended through an examination of *creative listening* as a driving force in explorations of subject matter (Deltner, 2025). Inspired by John Dewey, teachers' creative listening is characterized by a dynamic interplay between listening for originality and meaningfulness, which generates experiences of ambivalence and thereby prolongs and extends the exploration of the subject matter. By illustrating how teachers manage these tensions, the paper presents listening as a subtle yet powerful practice that enriches educational experiences and creates opportunities to connect meaningfully with the subject matter.

The present paper extends previous accounts of educational listening by offering an in-depth philosophical conceptualization of students' creative listening, primarily drawing on Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916/1985b) and *Art as Experience* (1934/1989). While prior research often situates listening as a shared activity between teachers and students, it typically emphasizes teachers' listening or treats teachers' and students' listening together; it has rarely examined students' listening as a philosophically distinct phenomenon during explorations of a subject matter. However, students occupy a different position than teachers in educational dialogue, shaped by asymmetries in power, experience, responsibility, vulnerability, and epistemic positioning. This paper, then, strives to place students' listening at the center, thereby giving voice to students' unique and diverse contributions to exploring subject matter in classroom transactions (English et al., 2021; Gundem, 2004). While teachers and students share some commonalities in how they listen, they also have distinct ways of listening within Dewey's conception (1939/2008b) of a creative democracy. As such, this paper expands the understanding of what it means to listen from different positions in an educational dialogue, showing how students' listening can redirect, deepen, and re-open subject matter over time.

The current paper strives to advance the understanding of students' listening by highlighting its creative nature. Although widely valued, creativity is often invoked in abstract or reductive ways and carries multiple, sometimes conflicting, meanings across the literature (Anderson et al., 2022; Benedek et al., 2021; Mullet et al., 2016; Weisberg et al., 2021). Drawing on educational theories of creativity, this paper explores how students' creative potential is characterized by aesthetic and embodied experiences that drive transactional inquiry (Corazza, 2016; Rabello-Mestre et al., 2025). Unlike conventional understandings of creativity as individual cognition, confident self-expression, or tangible products, this perspective characterizes students' creativity as quiet and subtle listening that facilitates a deeper understanding of subject matter. Moreover, this paper brings to the fore a dynamic reciprocity within creativity: attending to novel, original ideas while simultaneously ensuring their meaningfulness and relevance to the subject matter (Runco & Jaeger, 2012), arguing that novelty alone is insufficient; creative contributions must also meet the contextual demands in which they are situated (White, 2010). In this paper, this dynamic is explored through a listening for the unexpected and a listening for the expected, conceptualized as a Deweyan (1934/1989, pp. 20, 165) aesthetic rhythm that propels inquiry forward, producing reciprocal effects that unfold over time. In line with previous calls to explore how different forms of listening interact and constitute aspects of one another (Hintz & Tyson, 2015; English et al., 2025), and resisting simple dichotomies in keeping with Dewey's anti-dualism, I will therefore devote the rest of the paper to examining how these two listening orientations trigger, sustain, and depend on each other.

Students' Creative Listening as a Driving Force in Transactional Inquiries

I would like to start with offering a preliminary understanding of listening adopted in this paper, which will serve as a foundation for the subsequent exploration of its creative dimensions.¹ Informed by Dewey (Dewey & Bentley, 1949/1991), I define listening as a transactional engagement where the listener actively interprets and contributes to meaning-making within a relational framework, such as in a classroom interaction between students and educators (Gundem, 2004; Wickman, 2012). Dewey (1916/1985b) emphasized the inseparable connection between an individual and their immediate surroundings, illustrating that listening depends on having something with which to engage (p. 70). For example, in a classroom dialogue, a student can both affect classmates with questions and be affected by the responses to such questions. Accordingly, listening belongs as much to the listener as to the speaker. Since a Deweyan transaction does not have isolated parts (Dewey & Bentley, 1949/1991, p. 97), listening emerges in-between the listener and the speaker, where the listener takes both an active role in posing questions and a receptive role in experiencing the outcomes of those questions (Dewey, 1916/1985b, p. 182). This holistic approach highlights that students are not merely passive recipients of pre-established facts. Instead, it underscores the interconnected and ever-evolving nature of educational dialogue, where meaning is collaboratively constructed and continuously refined through the students' creative listening (Garrison et al., 2022; Ryan, 2011). As such, the questions students ask as a result of careful listening are not just about information; they are understood as invitations into deeper relations with the subject matter and with each other.

Importantly, students' listening is, for the purpose of this paper, understood as a driving force in educational dialogue. This means that listening is not mere hearing or a passive activity; it involves selectivity, interpretation, and intentional response (Fairfield, 2016). As such, the exploration of creative listening is grounded in Dewey's (1910/1985a) theory of inquiry, viewing listening as a cyclical process of noticing, questioning, and responding (p. 237; 1916/1985b, p. 157). For example, a student's listening initially involves noticing new aspects of a subject matter articulated by the teacher or a fellow student, asking a follow-up question to learn more about the new perspective, and experiencing the answer to such a question, thereby initiating a new listening interaction. This dynamic process continually renews itself as the listener engages and re-engages with evolving perspectives. Hence, in an educational dialogue, listening generates as many questions as answers, creating an active interplay of ideas. As such, the educational dialogue is characterized by students themselves inviting the teacher and other students to collaboratively nuance the understanding of a subject matter, a call for co-creation, rather than relying solely on the teacher to direct dialogue or frame the questions. This understanding of listening, then, invites students to take ownership of the dialogical process, engaging in recursive exploration of subject matter through different forms of listening (Dewey, 1916/1985b, p. 91). The students' lived experiences are central to this iterative process as they serve as bridges that connect successive acts of listening and enable a reflective inquiry that deepens the exchange and extends the conversation.

At the heart of understanding students' listening as a driving force of explorations into subject matter inquiry lies the idea that students' listening begins in a state of uncertainty, where openness to the unknown becomes a condition for meaningful engagement (English, 2023). Building on Dewey's (1938/2008a) notion that inquiry originates in an indeterminate situation, students' creative listening is here conceptualized as a mode of remaining in vulnerability, that is, resisting premature closure, sustaining openness in inquiry, and refraining from rushing toward resolution. In this view, when students listen, they do not yet know what can emerge from the dialogue, and their openness can reveal gaps in knowledge that risk being judged before they are fully explored. To listen attentively, reflect critically, and pose follow-up questions, then, is to embrace vulnerability. However, this vulnerability is a necessary

¹ Even though creative listening arguably can be a part of educational dialogues in different age groups, the focus here is on creative listening by secondary school students, with less attention given to early childhood education contexts, such as the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2005).

condition for growth (Dewey, 1934/1989, p. 41), as new, unfinished, and half-formed beginnings can redirect the exploration of subject matter toward novel dimensions, drawing attention to the emergent possibilities of a subject matter, one uncertain step at a time.

The Creative Interplay of Listening in Opposing Directions

The conceptualization of students' listening as a creative process is informed by both Deweyan educational theory and the broader literature on creativity, where creativity is widely regarded as an ambiguous, multifaceted, and contested concept open to diverse interpretations (Corazza, 2016; Glăveanu & Beghetto, 2021). Despite variations in definition, the literature on creativity commonly identifies two core dimensions: that creative acts must be both original (i.e., novel) and meaningful (i.e., contextually appropriate or valuable) (Runco & Jaeger, 2012).² As I will explore in detail below, this dual criterion underpins my interpretation of creative listening as a dynamic movement between contrasting but complementing listening orientations, that is listening for the expected (the meaningful dimension) and listening for the unexpected (the original dimension).

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1934/1989) stressed the generation of tension as essential for expanding explorations to facilitate the emergence of aesthetic experience (p. 29). Such an aesthetic tension is made up of opposing forces that expand the exploration in different directions (pp. 159–160). Dewey argued that these opposing forces trigger each other so that going off in one direction, if taken too far, would trigger an urge to create balance by initiating a movement toward the other direction. In a more elaborate account of how the movement between two opposing directions generates the necessary energy to facilitate an aesthetic experience, Dewey (1934/1989) argued,

There must be energies resisting each other. Each gains intensity for a certain period, but thereby compresses some opposed energy until the latter can overcome the other which has been relaxing itself as it extends. Then the operation is reversed, not necessarily in equal periods of time but in some ratio that is felt as orderly. Resistance accumulates energy; it institutes conservation until release and expansion ensue. There is, at the moment of reversal, an interval, a pause, a rest, by which the interaction of opposed energies is defined and rendered perceptible. The pause is a balance or symmetry of antagonistic forces. Such is the generic schema of rhythmic change save that the statement fails to take account of minor coincident changes of expansion and contraction that are going on in every phase and aspect of an organized whole, and of the fact that the successive waves and pulses are themselves cumulative with respect to final consummation. (pp. 159–160)

The excerpt above suggests that progress and transformation occur through the interplay of opposing forces. Each force gains power while simultaneously compressing its opposite, leading to moments of reversal and resolution. This cyclical tension and release create a “rhythmic change,” with each side momentarily holding power until it is overcome by the other. Thus, opposing forces are not obstacles but necessary elements to sustain and prolong exploration. The interaction between opposing forces creates a sense of order, even if the periods of tension and release are unequal. This orderly rhythm is a meaningful structure that arises from the chaotic push and pull of forces rather than from static harmony. Accordingly, learning does not happen in a smooth, linear manner but occurs through phases of tension accumulation and release, ultimately leading to development and growth.

I propose that students' creative listening is an example of communication that involves such opposing forces, forming an interlocking exchange that creates the necessary tension to drive an open-ended exploration forward and facilitate the conditions for an aesthetic experience to emerge.

² Though scholars diverge on which of these dimensions should be emphasized more heavily (Diedrich et al., 2015; Tanggaard & Wegener, 2016).

Accordingly, students' listening for the expected and the unexpected never occurs in isolation. These two forms of listening are interwoven and mutually reinforce one another, such that focusing too heavily on one naturally prompts an urge to shift attention to the other. This dynamic of starting again in contrasting directions propels the exploration of a subject matter forward. However, the nature of this reciprocal relationship between the two forms of listening can vary depending on whether greater emphasis is placed on listening for the expected or listening for the unexpected. I will unpack this statement below.

Giving Prominence to the Expected

Dewey (1916/1985b) emphasized the need for temporal stability in an unfinished universe, achieved through warranted assertions that bring order to complexity, and the importance of “*hypothetical* conclusions, of *tentative* results” (p. 155; Fiore, 2023), which help students ground their understanding before venturing into new inquiries. This temporary consolidation is essential for giving students the confidence to keep exploring unknown territories. Listening for the expected can also help guide students toward an uncertain future by establishing an “end-in-view” (Dewey, 1916/1985b, p. 112), giving them a general direction to follow. That is, although the exact journey and eventual outcome remain unknown, requiring an openness to unexpected developments, there is still a sense of anticipation about what comes next. In his interpretation of habits, Dewey (1916/1985b, pp. 57–58, 1938/1991, p. 19) maintained that repetition helps students develop expectations, enabling them to organize and interpret new information with which to adapt to new situations. Listening for the expected thus creates a readiness for what is to come, helping students engage with future interactions “more creatively and fruitfully” (Dewey, 1938/1991, p. 13).

Arguing that listening for the expected can be creative can seem counterintuitive, given that creativity is often associated with novelty and originality (Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2018; Tanggaard & Wegener, 2016). However, I maintain that a way of listening that gives prominence to the expected constitutes a central force for creative explorations. According to Dewey (1916/1985b), education is a continuum where new knowledge is integrated with what students already understand (p. 82). This suggests that the repeated engagement with familiar concepts fostered by listening for the expected reinforces knowledge and serves as a bridge to increasingly complex ideas. Listening for the expected is a repetition that lets students gain the ability to move beyond their initial, surface-level understanding, helping students to access new viewpoints that were inaccessible at the beginner level. Through repeated encounters with familiar material, students are afforded opportunities to re-enter the learning process from an increasingly informed standpoint, transforming repetition into a generative act of new possibilities and growth (1916/1985b, pp. 152–153). Hence, when focused on summaries, clarifications, and repetitions, listening provides a stability that transforms surprising explorations into familiar realizations, allowing students to consolidate their knowledge before moving toward more unexpected insights. Dewey (1934/1989) described this process as “ordered variation of changes” and “ordered periods of accumulation and conservation, marked off into intervals by the recurrent pauses of balance” (pp. 158, 160). These “pauses in exploration” created by listening for the expected offer the students a chance to gather their thoughts before continuing their exploration.

The following hypothetical example, where a teacher and students explore different understandings of a good life, illustrates a form of listening that gives prominence to the expected. After an initial discussion of different accounts of the good life—where theories of personal happiness and the pursuit of comfort and pleasure are contrasted with real-life stories showing how engaging with others can transform happiness into something rooted in community and shared experience—a student begins to seek a pause in the exploration, unable to absorb more in the moment.³ The student listens attentively for summaries, wanting the teacher or peers to recapitulate what has been discussed so far to better grasp

³ See, for example, Lomas et al. (2021)

the distinctions between individual and relational conceptions of happiness. Rather than pursuing further novelty, the student poses a clarifying question: “*So, when we say happiness here, do we mean something that depends on others, rather than just personal satisfaction?*” This question halts the movement into the unknown, creating a momentary resting point that consolidates the inquiry before it continues. By reflecting on the teacher’s perspective of a good life as grounded in communal striving and interdependence, and by reaching out in vulnerability to ask follow-up questions of the teacher and fellow students to clarify this new view, an opportunity arises to consolidate understanding. This moment signals that growth does not occur in a constant forward rush, but unfolds through cycles of movement and pause, exploration and consolidation. As Dewey (1934/1989) articulated it:

Time as organization in change is growth, and growth signifies that a varied series of change enters upon intervals of pause and rest; of completions that become the initial points of new processes of development. Like the soil, mind is fertilized while it lies fallow, until a new burst of bloom ensues. (p. 30)

Such moments of pause help the student to reorganize knowledge before heading out again, using the newly acquired knowledge as a springboard to collaboratively explore new dimensions of what it means to live well.

Giving Prominence to the Unexpected

I propose that the act of listening for the expected described above must be complemented with a listening that gives prominence to the unexpected. Namely, teachers can help students give prominence to either the expected or the unexpected, making it possible to explore a subject matter creatively through a variety of avenues. In listening for the unexpected, then, students reach out to the environment and listen for ways to be surprised, hoping to encounter new perplexities about the subject matter. As Dewey (1934/1989) argued, the exploration of a subject matter is an ongoing process without predetermined ends, a constant reorganization of directions that had not been recognized when the journey started (p. 116). Accordingly, a teacher can facilitate explorations that allow students to go past preconceived ideas about a subject matter and continue to explore in a mindset of “curiosity, unbiased responsiveness, and openness of mind” (Dewey, 1916/1985b, p. 55). Dewey (1934/1989) argued for the importance of adventure in establishing what is later to be perceived as an expectation:

If, instead of saying “experimental,” one were to say “adventurous,” one would probably win general assent—so great is the power of words. Because the artist is a lover of unalloyed experience, he shuns objects that are already saturated, and he is therefore always on the growing edge of things. By the nature of the case, he is as unsatisfied with what is established as is a geographic explorer or a scientific inquirer. The “classic,” when it was produced, bore the marks of adventure. This fact is ignored by classicists in their protest against romantics who undertake the development of new values, often without possessing means for their creation. That which is now classic is so because of completion of adventure, not because of its absence. (p. 149)

Here, Dewey critiques the rigid view of “classics” as timeless and static, highlighting that art, like science or exploration, thrives on adventure and novelty. A dissatisfaction with the established leads to a continual pursuit of uncharted experiences, making creation an ever-evolving process rather than a static achievement. Seen this way, growth becomes a recursive act of beginning anew, where students are continually invited to re-engage with subject matter from shifting vantage points. Moreover, Dewey (1925/1988) highlighted the importance of sensitivity in recognizing the layered complexity of experiences, asserting that “the same existential events are capable of an infinite number of meanings” (p. 241). This attunement fosters an appreciation for the multiplicity within a subject, encouraging students to go beyond surface-level recognition and develop richer, more complex understandings.

Dewey's educational theory suggests that students can be encouraged to expand such adventurous explorations of a subject matter into new contexts, such as subsequent lessons or informal conversations after school, listening for new aspects that might contribute to further growth (Dewey, 1938/1991, pp. 25–26). In revisiting a topic within new experiential settings, learners must remain sensitive to embodied and pre-reflective cues that signal the inadequacy of prior modes of interaction with their environment (Dewey, 1916/1985b, p. 157). Such readiness by the students to re-open explorations into subject matter beyond its initial presentation can foster moments of serendipity, where students take advantage of the possibilities emerging in the unplanned situation, thereby reshaping previously established understandings of subject matter in unexpected directions. As such, Dewey's ideas highlight how intuition precedes and informs reflective thought, advocating for a philosophy rooted in holistic experience and contextual engagement.

Such serendipitous listening for the unexpected reflects a trust in forces beyond their immediate control. Dewey (1934/1989) likened such a process to the unpredictable movements of wind:

There are about such occasions something of the quality of the wind that bloweth where it listeth. Sometimes it comes and sometimes it does not, even in the presence of the same object. It cannot be forced, and, when it does arrive, it is not wise to seek to recover by direct action the first fine rapture. (p. 150)

This metaphor reflects Dewey's (1916/1985b) assertion that "certainty cannot be guaranteed in advance. The invasion of the unknown is of the nature of an adventure; we cannot be sure in advance" (p. 155). Therefore, to achieve certainty, students must first embrace and navigate doubt before arriving at a state of assurance. Such listening for the unexpected aligns with Dewey's (1916/1985b) notion of a "freeing activity" that extends the inquiry into an indeterminate future (p. 112). For instance, a student's creative listening might involve discerning previously unexamined aspects of the subject that warrant further elaboration, posing questions about these aspects, and then engaging with the responses from teachers or peers. This interaction can generate openings into new lines of inquiry, thus perpetuating the cycle of exploration. Rather than settling for an initial understanding, the students remain attuned to additional viewpoints, whether from the teacher or peers, anticipating that new understandings will emerge in the future if they remain open to engaging with diverse perspectives.

Let us return to the hypothetical example of the dialogue that centered around the concept of a "good life" to illustrate how students can give prominence to listening for the unexpected. After earlier discussions appeared to settle the meaning of a good life as relational and meaningful, the student later encounters new aspects of what a good life entails in a different subject. During a social studies lesson, the discussion centers on adversity and new beginnings, illustrated through the narrative of refugees recalling their arrival in Sweden and subsequent integration into society. While listening to a peer's recount of this story, the student feels unsettled. This reaction is not immediately conceptual but bodily and affective, signaling that something exceeds their prior understanding of the good life. Attuned to this signal, the student asks a question that shifts the inquiry—"*Can a good life involve instability rather than balance?*" Listening for the unexpected here initiates a new line of exploration rather than consolidating an existing one, revealing a possible third path to a good life, one that encompasses the notion of a "psychologically rich life," characterized by diversity, unpredictability, and perspective-changing experiences, complementing previous accounts of hedonism and eudaimonia.⁴ As such, rather than seeking reassurance of habitual understandings of the world, the student listens for new ways to re-open the subject matter, challenging prior understandings by being attuned to new meanings arising beyond the original context.

⁴ See, for example, Huta and Ryan (2010) and Oishi and Westgate (2022).

The Dynamic Interplay of Listening for the Expected and the Unexpected

Listening for either the expected or the unexpected creates possibilities for reconfiguring prior understandings of a subject matter, in accordance with Dewey's (1916/1985b, pp. 152–153) conception of education as the continual reconstruction of experience. However, regardless of whether students give prominence to listening for the expected or the unexpected, we must consider the dynamics of a reciprocal relationship. For starters, the certainty students strive for when listening for the expected requires an attentiveness to the unexpected. In line with Dewey's (1934/1989) understanding of transactions, students can only reach assurance by testing hypotheses in interactions with the environment, where they must undergo the consequences of the actions taken (p. 25). Hence, the students rely on the teacher or other students to cultivate a sense of confidence in their current understanding of the subject matter. For students, listening for ways to redirect the exploration of a subject matter and ask questions in class is a small but significant "beginning." It is a moment where they expose their curiosity, confusion, or insight, and open themselves to peer or teacher response. To change the trajectory when exploring, therefore, involves risk. To consolidate their expected understanding of a subject, then, the students must embrace the vulnerability of reaching out to others and the open-endedness of inquiry, such as confronting the possibility that the teacher's interpretation of a subject matter may not align with their expectations. Consequently, as students seek to validate familiar concepts, they are, in some sense, required to listen for the unexpected, remaining suspended in uncertainty before anything can be confirmed as aligning with expectations.

Conversely, in exploring a subject matter, students listening for the unexpected is dependent on being attuned to the expected. For example, when confronted with an undetermined situation, the students must make use of established knowledge to navigate the newly discovered aspects of the subject matter through inquiry and reflection (Dewey, 1910/1985a, p. 237; 1916/1985b, p. 157). Additionally, in encountering the unexpected, possessing knowledge of the standard or dominant understanding of a subject matter is vital; it serves as a critical point of comparison when reorganizing experiences, as the juxtaposition of opposites provides a clearer, more defined understanding (Garrison, 1985). This comparison creates a sense of what counts as unexpected by allowing the listener to recognize deviations from the expected (familiar) and gauge how far they can explore new ideas before the inquiry gets too far off track (Dewey, 1916/1985b, p. 112). In helping students balance listening for the unexpected with the expected, the teacher can foster students' creativity within boundaries, ensuring that risks are considered and growth is grounded in meaningful contrasts. Ultimately, this dynamic aids students in listening for ways to push the boundaries of their understanding while still maintaining a sense of direction and coherence.

What is more, by complementing listening for the unexpected with intentional pauses, students can temporarily slow down the inquiry process rather than proceeding without reflection, thus facilitating a synthesis of newly acquired knowledge. Dewey (1934/1989) emphasized the need for such gathering of thoughts within various areas of work, pointing to the fact that "an engraver, painter, or writer is in process of completing at every stage of his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to a whole to come" (p. 63). As such, for Dewey (1916/1985b), "all communication is like art" (p. 9), and even in artistic activities, there is a continuous repetition where the creative exploration is summarized before moving on. Much like artists or writers engaged in creating a cohesive understanding of a subject, the students must listen for ways in which a teacher or other students confirm what they themselves already know about a subject matter. As the exploration progresses, the nature of students' listening shifts: what begins as unfamiliar gradually becomes familiar (Dewey, 1938/1991, p. 25). In this way, the dialogue transforms the unexpected into the expected, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of exploring a subject matter.

As demonstrated, listening for the expected cannot be fully separated from listening for the unexpected, as each is inherently linked to the other. Based on Dewey's (1934/1989, pp. 22, 29) understanding of engagement as arising from the tension created by opposing forces, listening too far to

one side (i.e., either affirming what is already known or being open to new interpretations) accentuates the opposing side, thereby triggering a listening in the opposite direction that generates interest and further exploration. As such, Dewey (1938/2008a) stresses that inquiry involves transforming indeterminate situations into ones of greater clarity, but never final certainty. Each resolution gives rise to new perplexities, ensuring that growth continues. In his analogy between continuous exploration and boxing, Dewey (1916/1985b) illustrated how each action is linked to the next in a dynamic sequence:

A person boxing may dodge a particular blow successfully, but in such a way as to expose himself the next instant to a still harder blow. Adequate control means that the successive acts are brought into a continuous order; each act not only meets its immediate stimulus but helps the acts that follow. In short, the direction is both simultaneous and successive. (pp. 29–30)

In this analogy, exploring a subject matter gradually, through successive encounters, involves a careful balance between immediate responses and long-term strategy, requiring “that each act be balanced with those which precede and come after, so that *order* of activity is achieved” (p. 24). Similarly, the creative interplay that occurs when listening for the expected and listening for the unexpected creates a rhythm in exploring a subject matter, preventing either overwhelming novelty or stagnation as teachers and students interact dynamically over time.

Teachers as Facilitators of Students’ Creative Listening

Dewey (1916/1985b) argued that teachers are essential in facilitating students’ understanding of a subject matter, noting that they can “create a wider and better-balanced environment than that by which the young would be likely, if left to themselves, to be influenced” (p. 27). As such, teachers can facilitate the kind of educational dialogue that lets students engage in creative listening. Here, students’ opportunity to begin anew is essential (Dahlbeck, 2024). According to Dewey (1938/1991), “Education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth” (p. 44). Students must not be expected to be fully formed but rather encouraged to test, experiment, and explore. This means giving students room to experience vulnerability as they re-open explorations into subject matter (D’agnese, 2017). First, in sensing an embodied and pre-cognitive perplexity that initiates further inquiry, and then in extending this inquiry to others in the educational dialogue, reaching out to the teacher or other students through half-formed and spontaneous questions, revealing an uncertainty about where the exploration will lead. Such continuation of exploration can meet resistance from both teachers and students, immersed in an educational culture focused on speedy efficiency and predetermined outcomes (Dewey, 1934/1989, p. 48). However, such vulnerability is central to the kind of dynamic growth that Dewey envisioned, opening new entrances into a subject matter and fostering shared ownership over the exploration. It is essential for teachers, then, to cultivate an educational environment that emphasizes attentive engagement over rushing ahead, encouraging students to linger in inquiry and deepen their understanding through creative listening.

Teachers can facilitate such continuation of exploration in alternative ways. For example, as a student explores a topic, the teacher can encourage them to begin by listening for the expected, drawing on familiar frameworks, established knowledge, and predictable patterns. This sets a stable foundation for the discussion. As the student becomes more comfortable, the teacher can prompt them to listen for the unexpected by questioning assumptions, challenging their understandings, and remaining open to new and unanticipated ideas. The complementary relationship between the two forms of listening allows the student to switch back and forth, continuously adapting their listening to deepen their understanding and stay flexible in their approach, thereby extending the exploration of a subject matter beyond the initial discussion.

Alternatively, the teacher can facilitate a more distributed approach by encouraging different students to listen for either the expected or the unexpected aspects of a subject during discussions. Some students will focus on listening for surprising or novel viewpoints and questioning the status quo by asking questions about exceptions, opposites, or alternative interpretations. Meanwhile, others are guided to listen for the familiar, grounding original ideas in well-established standpoints, and clarifying what is meant before moving beyond the security of what is known. In either case, the teacher must create an environment that values both forms of listening. By encouraging this dynamic interplay, the teacher helps students experience a generative tension that emerges from opposing positions, driving a more engaged and thoughtful exploration of the subject matter.

Conclusion

The version of creative listening examined in this paper is embedded within a Deweyan educational vision that values open-ended exploration over fixed ends and embraces vulnerability as a generative force rather than interpreting it as a hindrance. Within this dialogic engagement with subject matter, two contrasting yet mutually generative forms of listening are proposed as deserving of closer examination and deeper theoretical consideration: one directed toward the expected, which enhances predictability and clarity and generates necessary pauses that enable students to solidify their knowledge before they venture into the unknown, and another attuned to the unexpected, which builds trust that new interactions will bring the possibility of surprises and serendipitous insights, stretching a subject matter to new contexts, and reorganize previous experiences. These modes of listening not only complement but activate each other, enabling a rhythmic tension that Dewey identifies as essential to deepened understanding and subject-matter engagement.

The conceptual exploration of students' creative listening conducted in this paper challenges dominant educational models characterized by a linear trajectory toward predefined goals (English, 2023; Östman et al., 2024). Rather than emphasizing the rapid coverage of content within a tightly packed curriculum, where teachers ask questions solely to elicit correct answers, and where students' listening becomes a passive act oriented toward reproducing predetermined answers, students' creative listening is situated within open-ended and collaborative dialogues, emphasizing that students' dynamic listening in divergent directions must be given room to expand and prolong inquiry.

When educators support ongoing exploration and encourage listening for both the familiar and the surprising, they help create the conditions for aesthetic experiences to emerge. Such aesthetic experiences have both instrumental value, as they enhance students' readiness to adapt, respond to, and interact with the environment, and intrinsic value, as they help students resonate with a subject matter while exploring it (Dewey, 1934/1989, p. 63). Furthermore, I argue that through such aesthetic experiences, creative listening not only enhances students' understanding of a subject matter but also transforms how they engage with it. Through creative listening, students' aesthetic experiences extend their understanding beyond the subject matter itself to encompass the artistic processes that support its exploration. Such experiences include processes that emerge organically as collateral learning, which Dewey (1938/1991, p. 29) has identified as the indirect but meaningful consequences of engaging with subject matter within the context of teacher-student dialogues. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1934/1989) argued that

Communication is the process of creating participation. Of making common what had been isolated, singular, and part of the miracle it achieves is that, in being communicated, the conveyance of meaning gives body and definiteness to the experience of the one that utters as well as to that of those who listen. (pp. 248–249)

This communal venture of creative exploration cultivates a profound sense of belonging, encouraging students to view learning as a co-creative process that thrives on shared insight. As a result, the practice of creative listening for the expected and the unexpected fosters more than an expanded grasp of the subject matter; it cultivates an understanding of exploration as an inherently communal process, dependent on forces and environmental aspects beyond the individual student.

In describing these two listening orientations towards the expected and the unexpected, I do not intend to suggest a dualistic account of listening. In fact, from a Deweyan transactional standpoint (Dewey & Bentley, 1949/1991), the two listening orientations are inherently intertwined during collaborative inquiry. Nevertheless, they are sometimes treated separately in this paper to enhance conceptual clarity. Furthermore, the student-initiated listening towards either the expected or the unexpected might not be a rational choice but is embedded and triggered by the development of the educational dialogue. Hence, listening in the direction of the expected or the unexpected might be more or less intended by the students, fueled by pre-cognitive and embodied forces, making the re-direction of collaborative educational dialogue not just a rational choice, but habitual and triggered in interaction with the environment (English, 2023).

Moreover, the student-centered focus on listening explored in this paper should not be interpreted merely as a progressive educational stance, which Dewey (1938/1991) himself critiqued for overemphasizing student autonomy and choice. Such a view risks fostering an education that collapses into unstructured activity, avoiding challenging trajectories and reinforcing what students already know and feel comfortable with. Instead, this paper proposes a more dynamic conception of education in which the teacher fosters students' capacity to initiate and sustain inquiry through listening in divergent directions, in part through carefully judged pedagogical interventions. This includes recognizing and amplifying students' contributions to shared understanding, even when these arise unintentionally. Education, on this view, entails the teacher's ethical and pedagogical responsibility to cultivate conditions for co-creation, enabling learners to engage with subject matter through their listening in ways that exceed what they might accomplish alone.

This study extends prior accounts of educational listening by offering an in-depth philosophical and conceptual examination of students' creative listening, building on previous Deweyan explorations of listening (Deltner, 2025; English, 2009; English et al., 2025; Garrison, 1996, 2010; Haroutunian-Gordon & Waks, 2010; Meadows, 2013; Waks, 2011). Existing research conceptualizes listening as a joint practice between teachers and students, but it generally privileges teachers' listening or often merges teachers' and students' listening without carefully distinguishing students' listening as its own distinct philosophical phenomenon during the exploration of a subject matter. Yet students occupy a unique position within Dewey's vision of creative democracy, one that is different from teachers regarding power, experience, responsibility, vulnerability, and epistemic authority. This paper, therefore, seeks to foreground students' creative listening in transactional inquiry, giving voice to students' unique and diverse contributions to iterative explorations of a subject matter (English et al., 2021; Gundem, 2004).

The present study extends educational accounts of creativity by illustrating how students' creative potential can be conceived through their listening, characterized as embodied and aesthetic experiences that drive transactional inquiry (Corazza, 2016; Glăveanu & Beghetto, 2021; Hennessey, 2019; Rabello-Mestre et al., 2025; Rasmussen & Glăveanu, 2020; Sawyer, 2019). Rather than aligning creativity solely with cognitive processes, assertive self-expression, or the creation of products (Anderson et al., 2022; Benedek et al., 2021; Mullet et al., 2016; Weisberg et al., 2021), this account emphasizes creativity as a quiet and relational force where students attend to, reflect on, and ask follow-up questions that move the inquiry in divergent directions to facilitate richer educational experiences. Additionally, building on prior calls to investigate how diverse forms of listening interact and shape one another (English et al., 2025; Hintz & Tyson, 2015), and grounded in a Deweyan understanding of inquiry as an aesthetic rhythm that generates reciprocal effects over time, this paper shows how students' creative listening can be understood as a reciprocal interplay of listening for the unexpected and listening for the expected. In exploring how these listening orientations not only trigger one another but also can be characterized as

integral parts of each other, this paper advances a complex understanding of students' creative listening where the encouragement of novel understandings in open-ended explorations is integrated with a listening that summarizes, clarifies, and consolidates emerging perspectives on a subject matter, offering pauses that serve as platforms for further inquiry and growth.

While the tension that arises from moving between listening for the expected and listening for the unexpected arguably can produce non-creative results (such as stalling progress, reinforcing established assumptions, or ending exploration prematurely) it is this very tension that also fuels engagement with inquiry and leads students to uncover new dimensions of the subject matter. Balancing the forces of predictability and stability with those of unpredictability and surprise can lead to multiple entry points into a subject matter, deepening understanding and facilitating more dynamic and engaging experiences. In viewing students' creative listening as a collaborative, iterative and dynamic process, informed by Dewey's ideas of tension and rhythm, I have here argued for a perspective on student listening that positions listening not as a passive skill subordinate to speaking but rather as a creative form of engaging with others in educational dialogue, placing listening at the forefront of creative inquiries into subject matter.

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