Silence in the Classroom and on the Screen: A Hermenutic-Phenomenological Analysis

-Norm Friesen, June, 2009

“Silence [online sends] a message that is both brutal and ambiguous, far more so than the subtle uses of tone of voice, expression and gesture on which we normally rely…” (Feenberg & Xin, 2008).

“Silence shows itself as an act that cannot be performed in radical independence. Someone …must act in concert with someone or something which is fundamentally distinct from him [or her].” (Dauenhauer, 1980, pp. 24-25)

Introduction

Silence in the context of online, threaded, text-based, class discussions is frequently seen as posing a significant pedagogical challenge or “dilemma” (Feenberg, 1989; Xin & Feenberg, 2008). Those who provide advice on mentoring online discussions recommend strategies similar to ones used in the classroom. They ask moderators to “call on specific individuals just as a teacher might call on a student in a traditional class” (1995), and to engage in “explicit meta-communication,” explaining “unclear remarks,” and describing their “emotional tone and intent” (Feenberg & Xin, 2002).

But is the “solution” to silence simply its logical or dialectical opposite, more “communication?” Is online silence comparable to silence in the classroom? And what is the pedagogical significance of silence in either setting? These questions get at some significant experiential, pedagogical characteristics that separate online from offline. These kinds of characteristics, moreover, have proven difficult to pin down in research into online. In this presentation, I will explore the question of the pedagogical significance of silence by presenting and discussing descriptive and reflective passages from the literature of pedagogy (online and in the classroom) and from hermeneutic phenomenology.

Silence Online

Silence online is “brutal and ambiguous” as Feenberg and Xin put it, not because it shows that people are overloaded, distracted, or feeling uninterested. It is because silence can potentially mean all of these things and more, and all at the same time. It is often impossible to tell whether a student's failure to contribute to the discussion is due to technical difficulties, lack of time, lack of interest or motivation, illness or to other circumstances. Moreover, without posting a message to an online forum, it is difficult if not impossible to address that person directly: If I do not post a message, then a linked reference to my name will not appear anywhere in the conferencing area, and there will be no "reply" options appearing above it that would allow others to “address” me. Consequently, the act of not contributing online is clearly a “dilemma” as Feenberg and Xin describe it. And because someone’s silence can be respectful, attentive, embarrassed, hurt or even passively aggressive, silence has a problematic ambiguity that can easily render it “brutal” - -or at least decidedly negative—in its effect.

The dynamics of online silence are illustrated by the issue of "lurking" -- the act of "eavesdropping on a chat room or conference." In early online usage, and in off-line contexts,
this term carries a clearly pejorative meaning. Among other definitions, Webster's dictionary describes “lurking” as "lying in wait, especially for an evil purpose" (Webster, 2002). When I am "lurking" –figuratively lying in wait online-- I do not share the same vulnerability or openness as those for whom I am watching and waiting. I cannot be as easily addressed as those who have already posted, and whose messages and names populate the forum. At the same time, everyone in the conference is still led to suppose that I am regardless able to see everything that they are doing and saying. When more than one person is “lurking” in this way, one might say that this “simultaneous” lurking represents a kind of “silence” among multiple people. But unlike a collective silence in a room or classroom, it is one in which individuals are participating without necessarily being in any way aware of their shared silence. In the classroom, a shared or collective silence can be very conspicuous. As a lurker, I am able to read messages online, but I am effectively concealed, and I provide no indication as to the reasons for my concealment.

The physical presence of the body in the classroom, on the other hand, involves sharing that same space with other students and a teacher. Saying something or even remaining silent in a classroom and other setting involves a kind of vulnerability and trust that is part of the shared bodily co-presence. Being bodily present in class means that I can be addressed and asked a question, if not by the instructor then at least by my neighbor. This address or question, moreover, can be directed in kindness, indifference, or even hostility.

Of course, the physical vulnerability that is involved in bodily co-presence entails much more than feelings of trust or their negation through affirmation or humiliation. The needs and vulnerabilities that the body necessarily brings with it can be dealt with much more subtly: they can be allayed through acts of physical welcome (such as a handshake or hug) or expressed or suppressed dispositionally, through stances or postures that might betray passivity, aggression or a range of other characteristics.

Sound and silence have an intricate interdependency that is taken for granted in human communication; but this interdependent relationship changes in subtle but significant ways when communication takes place using different forms or “degrees” of mediation. As one moves, for example, from face-to-face contexts to the telephone through synchronous chat through asynchronous textual exchange, the significance silence is transformed. As a more extreme example in an online chat, one has no exposure to ambient sounds that might signal or explain an interruption in the other’s participation. And this same ambiguity is further amplified in online discussion, in which the moment-to-moment involvements of one’s interlocutor become even more remote and hypothetical. These kinds of difficulties can be said to mark increases in the ambiguity of silence. Silence gradually loses its usual communicative significance or determinacy; while in some cases it may still separate words and allow for turn-taking, it becomes increasingly less capable of doing something like even indicating a thoughtful pause or serving as a kind of “pregnant silence.” These types of significance necessarily arise online in competition with silence as a kind of dilemma or a technical problem: Is everyone on the line still there? Is everyone fully engaged in the discussion? Have they been distracted by things happening around them? Or has someone said something to upset them?

Classroom Silences

Silence in a physical classroom, however, is not in the same way devoid of indications of its causes and its possible significance. Even if one is silent in a classroom, one is still bodily
present. The dynamics of silence of the classroom are illustrated in the descriptive passage below, adapted from a phenomenological study of classroom communication. It depicts a grade 10 classroom in which the topics of alcohol consumption and alcohol abuse are being addressed, and focuses on an unexpected development:

...Richard, who usually sits in class with a detached gaze, suddenly became animated. He blurted out that it is hard to talk with your parents when they start relaxing with drinks as soon as they come home from work. "My mother is not really herself after she starts drinking," he said. The effect of his sudden outburst was amazing. Abruptly the whole class went silent and looked at him. This was so out of character for quiet Richard. But rather than ridiculing him they seemed to feel how he had risked himself. Then others, too, shared their experiences with alcohol and how friendships get ruined because of what happens when people become inebriated. As the kids were talking, it occurred to me how marvelous it was that they could share their vulnerabilities in this atmosphere of acceptance and togetherness. (adapted from Li, 2002, p. 26)

This passage describes an unexpected but deeply personal contribution to a class discussion by Richard, a student who is normally detached and quiet. Richard’s disclosure has a remarkable effect on everybody in the class: Turning to look at the student, they all abruptly become quiet. They fall into silence. Richard’s remarks, and the responses that follow from it, have the effect of generating what the teacher characterizes as an “atmosphere of acceptance and togetherness.” This positive and affirmative atmosphere is accompanied by relational qualities that, among other things, can be characterized as deeply personal and “non-specialized,” rather than as marked by the techniques and the vocabulary of narrowly defined expert knowledge or practice. The emphatically personal character evident in the passage cited is highlighted the teacher’s response to Richard’s contribution, and to the contributions from other students that eventually follow it. This response is one of holding back, of active and reflective listening, of allowing the students in the class to act and respond on their own: “As the kids were talking, it occurred to me how marvelous it was that they could share their vulnerabilities…” In this sense, this response on the part of the teacher forms an additional, secondary silence that extends beyond the first silence of the class as a whole. Such a response is non specialized in that it involves no specific, specialized technique or act of expert categorization –rather, it appears as an act of personal openness, attentiveness and attunement.

The initial silence of the class’s response to Richard’s disclosure—as well as the teacher’s subsequent silence—is worthy of further reflection: Both examples illustrate how silence, as a phenomenon, does not need to be either simply passive nor entirely negative: These examples show that silence is not simply the absence of an opportunity, authority or occasion to speak. It is also not just the opposite of “noise” as something that would otherwise interfere with effective communication. Silence in the classroom does not possess the brutal ambiguity of the absence of textual (or other) information or data, as it does online. To quote Bernard Dauenhauer’s phenomenological study of silence, the silences of both the class and of the teacher show how silence can be "an active human performance" which means that it "is neither muteness nor mere absence of audible sound" (1980, pp. 24, 4). Similarly, Heidegger observes of silence, that “he who never says anything cannot keep silent at any given moment” (2000, p. 208). Silence arises
in intricate interrelationship and interdependence with speech. It “always appears in connection with an utterance” as Dauenhauer states (1980, p. 24). Significantly, the silence of the class described above can be said to arise in close connection with the utterances of others: emerging from Richard’s disclosure, and then giving rise to the contributions of others in the class.

In this sense, this “positive” or “significant” silence is an example of an “active performance” of silence of which Dauenhauer speaks. The “acts” presented by these silences are also not the result of any one person’s decision, work or will to be silent. Silences of this kind, Dauenhauer emphasizes, “cannot be completely performed by an individual acting alone” (1973, 26):

Phenomenally… silence [of this kind] shows itself as an act that cannot be performed in radical independence. Someone must indeed act for there to be silence. But he must act in concert with someone or something which is fundamentally distinct from him.

(Dauenhauer, 1980, pp. 24-25)

The silence of the class that follows Richard’s disclosure is of a very different kind that might follow the teacher calling the class to order. No one person, neither student nor teacher calls for or requests the silence. This silence, in other words, is one in which students are acting in concert without being told or agreeing in advance to do so. Because it is in this sense a spontaneous act involving all those present, silence can be said to both “bind” and “join” –as Dauenhauer again puts it (1980, p. 24). Because silence is entered into, uncoerced and unpremeditated, by more than one person, it has the effect of underscoring a connection between those who may together “fall into” it. This connection is not one that is made explicit in language.

Although silences of this kind represent an “active performance,” the kind of concerted “act” or “deed” that is actually performed through these silences is decidedly understated. It is an act of “entering into passivity.” As Dauenhauer puts it, it is a kind of unforced “yielding:” “silence shows itself as a yielding which binds and joins” (1980, p. 24). However, if to fall silence in this way is to give way or yield, precisely what is being yielded to? In the case of the class’s silence following Richard’s disclosure, what is being yielded to can be interpreted in different ways. On one interpretation, that which is being yielded to is the weight of Richard’s situation, and even the significance of his sudden disclosure of it. In the case of the teacher’s implied, attentive silence “as the kids were talking,” silence represents a giving way to their willingness to be open and vulnerable. Quoting the description itself, one might say that the teacher’s silence is a yielding before the “atmosphere of acceptance and togetherness” that emerged after Richard’s disclosure. In both cases, the yielding enacted through silence is a giving way to what others are saying or doing. The “doing of silence” in this sense “opens me to the other,” as Dauenhauer puts it. The other,” in this context, Dauenhauer continues, “needs my yielding to reach me” (1973, p. 28). This otherness to which silence yields, Dauenhauer further explains, is something “which is beyond one’s control” (1980, p. 25). In the silence of the class, this thing beyond one’s control might be said to be Richard’s situation, its effect on him, his willingness to trust and to share with others. In the case of the teacher’s silence, it is the class’s response to all of this. Her yielding to it can be seen as a recognition of something that she cannot control and does not wish to try to control or limit. And insofar as it is a yielding that is necessary for another to reach me, it is also has the potential to join or to bring self and other into connection.
Of course, when considered on its own, the silence of the class cannot be reduced to a single meaning, but is expressive of a range of possible significances. In an article specifically on “the sound of silence in pedagogy,” Zembylas and Michaelides write that “positive” classroom silences of these kinds “can…indicate a kind of unspoken understanding” or “can be the manifestation of…fear of self-exposure through speaking openly.” It seems likely that the silence described above incorporates some of both of these meanings: the students in Richard’s class are likely afraid to risk what Richard has risked; but at the same time, the discussions that follow show that a kind of “unspoken understanding” that affirms mutual respect and openness may be gradually emerging. Classroom silence, Zembylas and Michaelides continue, is also associated the fact that “the majority of students’ emotional communications take place without talk.” In this sense, they say, silences like the one following Richard’s personal and emotional disclosure “may create meaningful spaces in which emotions (such as anger and hatred) can be reinterpreted” (2004, p. 203).

What is reinterpreted and communicated in the “meaningful spaces” presented by the classroom silence described above is not anger and hatred, but rather, individual and mutual vulnerability. There is vulnerability to the destructive shortcomings and habits of their parents, and of the other adults around them, and there is simultaneously the students’ vulnerability to one-another.

It is not by chance that the meanings of silences, emerge with the simultaneous power and ambiguity of meanings of the body. For what is being communicated, reinterpreted and understood are embodied feelings and experience: the mutuality of the risk and exposure that is communicated and explored is also the mutuality of embodiment. The space of silence that they share is also the shared intercorporeal space they share in their embodiment. One might say that in or through these kinds of “meaningful silences,” it is the bodies participating in that silence that are foregrounded, and that are given a chance to speak –and that they speak of emotion, in this case not anger or fear, but of pain and the risk of exposure to it.

**Silence in the Encounter with the Other**

I’d like to briefly making the case that there is much more to silence in communication than simply the omission of particular cues or specific kinds of contextual information.

To do so, I make reference to the Danish thinker Knud Løgstrup and the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas; for both silence is a fundamental part of existential relationality and ethics. Both Løgstrup and Levinas emphasize the importance of a kind of unspoken or silent “contact” or “demand” that arises when the self is addressed by another face-to-face. In being addressed by another, both Løgstrup and Levinas insist, the addressee is placed in a position requiring a response –in a position, in other words, of responsibility.

In his book *The Ethical Demand* (1997), Løgstrup begins by focusing first on questions of address and response, and on the way in which actions and encounters of this kind represent a type of ethically-charged challenge or “demand” for response. Løgstrup describes any question or address, however meek or kindly it may be communicated, as presenting an implicit request or demand to the person to whom it is addressed. LOGstrup also introduces this “ethical demand” by referring to it first as a kind of “unarticulated” or “silent demand.” It is a “demand implicit in
every encounter between persons,” Løgstrup explains – one which is “not vocal” but rather, “remains silent” (22):

Regardless of how varied the communication between persons may be, it always involves the risk of one person approaching the other in hope of a response… in every encounter … there is an unarticulated demand, irrespective of the… nature of the encounter. (18)

Løgstrup is careful to indicate that this particular demand is not simply an unspoken expectation to respond to the address or to answer its explicit content. “This demand,” he emphasizes, “is not merely for a response to what we say… it is not to be equated with a person’s expressed wish or request” (15, 21). Instead, what is implicitly or “silently demanded” in the other’s address is the recognition of the other; to enter responsibly into relation with the person who has made the address. So this is done not in terms of the content of the address itself, but in terms of a dispositional or attitudinal atmosphere, tone or “note” that Løgstrup characterizes as also being implicit in his or her address.

Løgstrup explains that when the other addresses me, he or she is demanding something of me. What is demanded, however, is very different from the explicit content of the other’s address. It is instead something that is implicit, that is communicated tacitly through the attitudinal or dispositional tone or note of the address. Through this tone, in other words, the person who articulates the address puts him- or herself in a position of trust or risk. And this can happen, moreover, without the other actively engaging in an overture. Being bodily present in class, of course, means that I can be addressed and asked a question, if not by the instructor then at least by my neighbour. Such an address can also be met by a hostile response that exploits the other’s position of risk, however silent, implicit or understated. What transpires in these situations, moreover, is all the more significant because the demand made by the other is not simply to receive a response. It is a demand to be recognized and addressed as such, in order to be regarded as a person or as another.

Dauenhauer says something similar in discussing “utterances” and the “appeal” that any one utterance will inevitably make beyond what is said in order to achieve its “authentication:”

At bottom, in all utterance there is an appeal beyond the utterance for an authentication of the utterance. No utterance is ultimately and definitely authenticated by another utterance or set of utterances… Authentication must be awaited in silence. Whatever is uttered is either validated or invalidated [in this way] (19-20)

Dauenhauer is emphasizing not only that any address is an appeal for recognition and authentication, but consonant with Logstrup, he is also saying that such an appeal or demand goes beyond language into silence. Tied to every question, every address, is the silent appeal to be recognized and authenticated.

Silence, in other words, is not simply a phenomenon that might play a role in the odd, exceptionally sententious classroom discussion. It is instead something that underlies our encounter with others; that provides a kind of acoustic context for sounding out the ethical dimension of an encounter with the other. Understanding silence as relationally significant in this
way implies that it can become a part of a kind of embodied practice or praxis. Such a practice of silence, of course, would be illustrated in the activity or rather, the passivity and receptivity specifically of the teacher’s response to Richard’s disclosure—and to the subsequent silence of the class—in the description provided above. Indeed, in their article on classroom silences, Zembylas and Michaelides advocate precisely such a pedagogical “praxis of silence.” They emphasize that such a praxis points to the significance of ignorance, unknowability and the inexpressible:

The most valuable contribution teachers and students might be able to make is keeping open the possibility for questioning silences in the classroom and, even more important, for responding in silence. This suggests a pedagogy that is no longer informed simply by knowledge, but by ignorance, unknowability, and the inexpressible. There is definitely a risk involved in this effort, both for students and teachers, because it is sometimes difficult to interpret silences in public spaces; yet it may be a worthwhile risk to take.

They call for a way of thinking and acting in education—a pedagogy—which recognizes a value of unknowing as much as silence. What emerges from this recognition of the importance of silence, non-action and even ignorance in education are a number of conclusions that may be of no small significance for pedagogy:

1) Communicative and pedagogical practices are not exclusively active performances—they also involve a kind of embodied, dispositional “being with others.”

2) The body plays an ambiguous but indispensable role that is played by the body in this kind of communication as an active and passive “being with others.” The meaning communicated in an embodied, co-present silence, such as the class’s silence following Richard’s disclosure, is never simple or unambiguous. As Merleau-Ponty says, “The experience of our own body… reveals to us an ambiguous mode of existing… the body is not an object. For the same reason, my awareness of it is not a thought, that is to say, I cannot take it to pieces and reform it to make a clear idea.” This applies not only to my own body, but that of others, and also “the body” in its existential, experiential dimensions.

3) This significance of the body in communication, and especially in the normative, ethical aspects of encountering and communicating with the other, helps us to understand the how the possibilities for online pedagogy are limited. Online contexts, especially those that are textually based, sharply attenuate the possibilities for student-teacher, and student-student encounters, especially in terms of their ethical nuance and import.

4) Insofar as pedagogy is an exercise in passivity and ignorance—and not only an active practice in mobilizing “positive” knowledge—it has a clear antipathy to the communicational and experiential characteristics of online learning.