

One Student's Experience of Silence in the Classroom

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Abstract

This paper considers the question of student silence in the classroom, a phenomenon that is all too readily seen as a matter of obedience or defiance, or of political privilege or disempowerment. Instead, this paper shows how student silence in the classroom can be part of a learning experience, in which the student is crossing a threshold between the comfort of what is “no longer,” and a moment of attainment or awareness that is “not yet.” Written by an Master's student together with her project advisor, this paper illustrates this dynamic by examining an example of one student's silence in a Master's of Education course on educational leadership. This example and the associated reflections show how phenomenon of silence can bring with it a wealth of meanings that are often not readily disambiguated and identified.

Introduction

In many classrooms, evaluation of learning relies on easily observable, easily measurable student actions and behaviors. Open any teaching strategies book today and you will find numerous recommendations for engaging the “active learner.” Activities such as “large group discussion,” “small group discussion,” and “think-pair-share” have become commonplace within the classroom.

In any classroom there will be students who spend much of their classroom time in silence. For learners who remain silent during exercises in active learning, do these methods support or accurately reflect their level of learning or involvement within the classroom? How do students experience silence in the classroom? What does silence have to do with learning?

When passivity, non-participation or silence are considered, much of the discussion comes from the perspective of the instructors and “strikingly absent from most of these explorations of silence are the perspectives of students” (Reda, 2009, p.7). A need for the inclusion of student voices and experiences has been recognized from multiple perspectives (e.g., Tartar, 2005; Reda, 2009; Schultz, 2009).

The increasing numbers of non-traditional students in post-secondary institutions underlines the importance of bringing awareness to the multiple experiences of silence within the classroom and to challenge generally accepted assumptions placed on the value of these silences. “What is often forgotten but imperative,” Litner reminds us, is “to remember is that universities are not natural, homogenous, neutral sites” (2008, p.47). Additionally, Glenn warns that “silence is too often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power” (2004, p. xi); and still others have noted that in “some cultures silence...can be viewed as a sign of complex thought” (Bosacki, 2005, p. 86). I recall various situations of my own silences as a student and know that my experiences were not all the same. Sometimes I remained silent because I agreed with what was being said and chose not to speak. In other situations, I was deep in thought and was using the time to make sense of my thoughts and gather a response.

I have chosen to use a personal description of one of my lived experiences of silence in the classroom as the vehicle for entering into this inquiry. In doing so, I follow the methodology of

van Manen (1997) who refers to such descriptions of lived experience as “anecdotes.” Anecdotes are descriptions of an incident that use descriptive techniques in an attempt to bring the experience alive to readers. These descriptions, then, are interpreted in writing, according to common experiential categories, as a way of reflecting on the experience, and of accessing dimensions of it that experience that might otherwise remain implicit.

A Classroom Silence: Description and Reflection

I sit in class, listening to the voices of the other students, themselves mostly teachers, surrounding me. The discussion expands as the instructor, standing at the front of the classroom, settles his gaze on raised hands, granting individual students permission to add their voice to the discussion.

I quietly ask, “What about respect?” Another student blurts, “Well, obviously as teachers we all respect our students; otherwise we wouldn’t be teachers. That goes without saying, right!?”

My gaze quickly slides over the faces of the other students. The statement is met with nods and smiles. I know from brutal experience that this is not true! I hold my breath and wait for someone to disagree. Anyone! My voice screams inside my head, “Do you all believe that?” I know not all teachers respect their students!

Although silence (including the silence in this description) can be interpreted from many different perspectives, I begin my exploration of the opening of this description by using the four lifeworld existentials of lived time, lived body, lived space, and lived relation as identified by van Manen (1997, pp. 101 – 105). The exploration will then move into considering silence as power; silence as gendered; silence as oppression; silence as protection; and silence as expression of identity. I will also briefly look at “good” and “bad” classroom silence; and student perceptions of student silence. Based on these explorations, I close with some final thoughts and reflections.

The lived body and lived space are predominant as an existential in the description thus far. I am seated and others are seated around me. I won’t go as far as to say that I am described as being relaxed but at the very least, I am feeling no strong bodily response, more of a neutral stance. The description, so far, also provides no indication that would suggest that I am not a member of the class and a part of the discussion. However, the statement, “*mostly teachers*” suggests a particular relationship with this group of students. Although they are not all the same, there is something about them being teachers that seems to set them apart.

As in a traditional classroom setting, the teacher in this description occupies a position of power at the front of the classroom, with the students in a subordinate position, seated before him. It has often been observed that this traditional spatial arrangement in the classroom is expressive of a kind of authority, knowledge, and power; and it certainly places the instructor in a relationship which is potentially pivotal.

When I quietly ask, “What about respect?” I can be said to be tentatively adding my thoughts to the discussion. The brevity and apparent timidity of the comment might be interpreted as indicating that I am almost asking permission to participate --that, somehow, I am unsure of my question and perhaps that I am shy. When “another student blurts” in response to my question, they seem more forceful and sure of their answer. They seem to know what they are talking about and appear confident in their response. But the question raised in one particularly perceptive study of silence remains: “Given that we can not experience another person’s subjective experience, how can we ever ‘really know’ if people truly know what they are talking about – or if they really understand what they are saying?” (Bosacki, p. xvi). Keeping this last question in mind, I return to the description:

With my voice screaming inside my head, my eyes dart to the instructor standing at the front of the class. Our gazes collide. He continues to scan the faces of the other students and I drop my eyes to stare at the desktop. My lungs ache as I hope for a sign of disagreement from one of my classmates. It does not happen and the discussion continues. My breath whooshes from my lungs. A hot, prickling wave rolls across the surface of my skin. My stomach rolls and a piece of recently consumed muffin pushes against the base of my throat.

The desktop vanishes from my sight and the voices fade as memories crowd my mind. My senses fill with the sights, sounds, and smells of a long ago class room: Tiny blue and green desks evenly spaced. The scents of glue and pink pearl eraser hang in the air. A tall, dark haired man, cheeks spotted red, spittle gathering on his lower lip, looms over a small, pale, upturned face seated below him. His cruel words freeze the boy in place. For another student, quick foot steps are followed closely by the loud crack of a wooden yard stick hitting the desk top. An unwelcome, even violating hand is reserved for some who are the most unfortunate.

The description manifests a sudden, jarring shift between past and present experiences. Initially, “I sit in class, listening to the voices of the other students, themselves mostly teachers.” I am firmly in the space and also time of the present. The anecdote moves into the temporal dimension of the past, and this occurs as if through a series of profound convulsions of mind and body. Voices from the university classroom fade as my awareness shifts to the past, and my senses fill with the sights, sounds, and smells of a very different classroom from long ago.

This seems to be an anxious and melancholy space, very different from the present, but experienced as very viscerally real: “Tiny blue and green desks evenly spaced. The scents of glue and pink pearl eraser hang in the air.” The felt space becomes intimidating and narrow when “a tall, dark-haired man, cheeks spotted red, spittle gathering on his lower lip, looms over a small, pale, upturned face seated below him.” The space seems to take on the feeling of the teacher’s threatening anger. “His cruel words freeze the boy in place” and the space can be said to be charged with fear, leaving the child cornered, shackled, and unprotected. Talking about such intense and fearful feelings of space, Bollnow, writes:

Fear means literally constriction of heart, and the outer world draws in oppressive and heavy on the man in fear. When fear departs the world spreads out and opens

a larger space for action, in which a man can move freely and easily. (Lived Space, 1961, translated by Dominic Gerlach)

The anecdote concludes by only very gradually moving to a broadening out of space and the possibilities that Bollnow associates with it:

Class ends. I sit motionless and pull my thoughts into the present. My mind buzzes as fractured images collide, bounce and skitter in all directions and a mist of thoughts swirl, refusing structure. Pushing through the cold plate glass door, I see my car at the end of the parking lot. Slowly I wade past the other cars dragging a mind full of chaos. My forehead briefly rests on the cool backs of my hands before I reach forward and turn the ignition key. My pale fingers clench and unclench the steering wheel as the car moves toward home. Gradually my mind quiets as thoughts coalesce. My chest muscles relax and my breathing returns to a rhythmic in...out...in...out. I am now ready to speak! Unfortunately, the class has ended long ago and the opportunity to speak has passed. I remain alone with my thoughts.

This concluding part of the account can be said to gradually open up to a different kind of experiential space—one that is not a classroom at a university or in the school of a recollected childhood, and not so charged with fear and panic. This space appears to become protected, familiar, and safe once “I unlock the car door and slip behind the steering wheel.” Is it because I am now moving toward the security of my home that the space seems to feel lighter, safer? van Manen writes:

Home has been described as that secure inner sanctity where we can feel protected and by ourselves (Bollnow, 1960; Heidegger, 1971). Home is where we can *be* what *we are*. (1997, p. 102, italics in original)

“I am now ready to speak!” But unfortunately, the class has ended long ago and the opportunity has passed. Although I remain alone with my thoughts, I find myself in a space that (compared with what I was experiencing earlier) feels large, comfortable, settled, safe, and accepting. But I somehow feel that something remains unfinished, and despite a renewed sense of comfort and safety, I am not completely satisfied.

The Opposed Meanings of Classroom Silences

All four of the existentials—body, space, time and relation-- flow through and around each other to create the successive moments of the particular experience offered above. Something similar can be said to occur with silence. As Baurain (2011) suggests, when considering the meaning of silences, “attempts to classify or delineate borders among silences only reveal the borderlines as layered and permeable. Silence might be simultaneously generative and suppressive, speaking and silent, fruitful and harmful” (p. 99). “Adam Jaworski points out that any effort to formulate the final definition of silence can be easily entrapped in an infinite regress of definitions” (as cited in Li, 2001, p. 157).

In reviewing different explanations and motivations offered in educational literature for student silences in the classroom –and in reflecting on my own silence in this context-- these regresses and contradictions become readily apparent. Just as it is the case that various elemental dimensions of experience cannot be disentangled one from another, it is also the case that any one theoretical explanation of a given silence asks for further ones. However, unlike lived time, space, body and relation, the different explanations for silence tend not to be consistently complimentary or mutually reinforcing. They are often opposed. Classroom silences, mine included, can be interpreted as both empowerment and *disempowerment*, as protective and damaging to identity, and of being an expression of compliance and attention, *and* of disobedience and distraction.

Beginning with feminist and critical-theoretical understandings of silence, Ochoa and Pineda caution that “we should be aware of the ways in which power, privilege, and exclusion in the larger society may be reproduced in our own classrooms” (2008, p. 45). In the article, *Gender and Silence: Implications of Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Gallos (1995) emphasizes that practices of silence by women in the classroom have traditionally disempowered this gender in this setting. She concludes that “women harbour more self-doubt and questions about capabilities and intellectual competence than men do” and “the male-based focus of educational systems, structures, and pedagogies contributes to women’s alienation” (p. 102). Gallos expands these thoughts by explaining:

Women have been asked to learn the experience of men and accept it as representative of all human experience. When women cannot match this (masculine) knowledge to their own lives or see it as relevant, the women – not the facts, theories, and curricula – have been termed deficient (e.g., Kohlberg, 1981; Vaillant, 1977). (p.103)

One female quoted in Gallos’ article states: “In mixed groups, it’s hard to say *I’m thinking about this differently*. That recognition can lead to tension, possibly conflict. I just keep things to myself and avoid it all” (p. 103, italics in original). How might gender be shaping my own experience of silence? I know that I harbour self-doubt, question my capabilities and intellectual competence --but do I do this more than a male student? Is this evident from the text of the anecdote itself? Do I give the instructor power based on his representation of the male norm that I do not meet? Would I have been so quick to grant equal authority to a female instructor? Other examinations of classroom silence that reference critical theory identify patterns that are relatively independent of gender, but instead depend more on when and how much a person speaks. When exploring silence in relationship to social power (Schultz, 2010) suggests that a student who speaks less often and at the end of a discussion tends to be listened to and holds more power than a student who speaks “incessantly.” Also, when a student chooses to be silent it may mean that he or she is exerting power. For example, silence may be used as a means to protect one’s beliefs, values, or culture; or the student may or may not agree with what is being said in the classroom. As Schultz observes, a student who remains silent is able to “hold on to practices and beliefs that might make them vulnerable to their peers and teachers” (2010, p. 2835) and their silence is a form of protection. Reda (2009) makes a similar observation when she suggests that when a student who rarely speaks does speak, other students tend to take the time to listen.

These sources are in effect, drawing conclusions quite opposed to the literature on gender and silence just above: Reda, Schultz and others are saying, in effect, that silence increases the power and importance of what someone says when they break a long silence. Thinking of the description above, perhaps one could say that I am such a student, who gains some power subtly by my silences and my relatively rare forays out of this silence.

When considering the power dynamics of silence, it is important to note that there is a difference between being *silent* and being *silenced*. Housee notes “that sometimes the silence in the class can be both a consequence of oppression and a form of resistance” (2010, p. 421). When viewed in this context, silence may be a choice made by the individual or imposed by the constraints of the systems of power or institutions. Choosing to be silent can be an exertion of power whereas being silenced involves a loss of power for the individual (Fivush, 2010). Castagno identifies that “‘silencing’ is an act done to someone else” (2008, p. 318). Corrigan (2011) acknowledges that “writing, speaking, and teaching in resistance to the things that are wrong in the world are bold and essential tasks” and suggests that although scholars and teachers have “resisted injustice through breaking the silence on oppressive systems and ideologies” (p. 8), the resulting work (i.e., critical perspectives on class, race, gender, ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, and disability studies) still have not “fully given voice to the voiceless” (p. 9).

Thinking in terms of the multiple, critical categories of class, gender, postcoloniality, etc., it is possible to consider my own experience of silence further: Although I share a similar cultural background to many of the other students, the knowledge that I do not occupy some of the same social roles as others in my class may be important. I have a university degree but did not complete a Bachelor of Education program and this difference leads me to question the value of the education that I have compared to many of those who have an education degree and a teaching certificate. Because of this I assume that they have more relevant knowledge coming into the M.Ed program than I do. As the first person in my family to obtain a university degree, I am very aware that other students come from families where university education is common. This leads me to assume that they are more knowledgeable about the ins and outs of being a graduate student. I also assume that many of them, due to their professional status as teachers, are of a higher economic class than me. Because of these assumptions I am in a position where I am much more likely to question the appropriateness of challenging their beliefs and knowledge, regarding both the roles of the teacher and of the student.

Silence has similarly opposed values when viewed from an instructional perspective: Students who practice silence requested by the instructor, such as silence during an exam or silence while the instructor speaks, tend to be viewed by the instructor positively whereas a silence that is an expression of the students own initiative, such as during a large or small group discussion, tends to be viewed in a negative light by the instructor. Reda identifies “those silences initiated by students are troubling, problematic, and disruptive” (2009, p.5), adding that “professors have a whole vocabulary for explaining student’s silence: They’re unprepared, resistant, hostile, less intelligent, ‘absent’” (2010, p. A68). When a student is silent, many times the instructor assumes that something is wrong or not working and needs to be fixed and generally the fix is to get the learner to talk. “The student who learns is the “active” student; active has become synonymous with highly vocal” (Reda, 2009, p.5). Ollin suggests “that a cultural bias towards talk means that

silence is commonly perceived negatively” (2008, p. 265). Schultz (2010) sums this all up when she says: “students who practice silence are often thought of either as ‘good’ (compliant) or ‘bad’ (resistant or stupid)” (p. 2834).

I quietly ask, “What about respect?” Another student blurts, “Well, obviously as teachers we all respect our students; otherwise we wouldn’t be teachers. That goes without saying, right!?” I hold my breath and wait for someone to disagree. Anyone! These two statements, or rather, questions represent the only spoken words within the whole anecdote.

When I hold my breath and wait for someone to disagree, when I in effect initiate my silence, what exactly am I waiting for? Am I waiting for someone to disagree about the other student’s action of blurting out of an answer? Or am I waiting, perhaps, for someone to disagree with the content of the answer that has been provided? Zembylas and Michaelides (2004, p. 194) suggest “any effort to define silence can quickly become engulfed in an endless array of complexities.” And this applies also to this exploration of my very own silence. The more I try to isolate and examine any one dimension of the silence the more complex and entwined it seems to be with other aspects and possibilities of silence.

Conclusion: Silence and Learning

In drawing this paper to a conclusion, it is a quote from Baurain’s (2011) article on teaching, listening, and “generative” silence that seems most appropriate:

Silence is a multifaceted, often purposeful border between thoughts and speech or between thoughts and words. Silence might indicate thoughts that cannot be spoken, truths or realities that are or seem to be inexpressible. It might indicate thoughts that cannot be spoken *yet* for which the process of verbalizing has not yet taken hold. It might indicate that one does not choose or feel ready to speak, for whatever reason.” (p. 90, italics in original)

Baurain affirms the multifaceted character of silence that is similarly highlighted by others who have investigated the phenomenon. At the same time, he points to a general temporal orientation of silence: it tends to come before articulation, expression or decision; one is *not* yet ready to speak, the process of verbalizing has not yet taken hold. The outcome of my own silence is that I am ready to speak. But the period without expression that precedes this, as Baurain indicates, is expressive of a “not yet.”

At the same time, there may be a further temporal characteristic of silence to be noted: Something seems to come *before* it. In the silence described above, this appears as a feeling of disquiet and marginalization where there was once comfort –or at least a “neutral stance”-- and a sense of relative belonging. This sense is quite suddenly interrupted, and I am no longer with the class, and no longer a part of the discussion, taken to a different place and time. But behind this experience, as the end of the anecdote suggests, is a desire to say something, but without having that something to say.

Silence, as it is explored here, appears suspended between an experience of something –often a sense of comfort and relative belonging– that is “no longer” and a second possibility that is “not yet” –the prospect of having something to say. In this sense, in its temporal structure, silence, its uncertainty and indeterminacy, appears to be remarkably similar to the experience of learning itself. In her recent phenomenological study, *Discourses of Learning (Diskurse des Lernens)* Kathe Mayer-Drawe describes the experience of learning as being located “at the threshold between *no longer* and *not yet*” (2008, p. 15). She reminds us that we cannot say at any one point that “we are now beginning to learn.” In a similar way, it would seem quite inappropriate for me to say that I am beginning to formulate a response when my voice begins screaming inside my head, and memories begin crowding my mind. Mayer-Drawe adds that we can only know “we have learned” after the fact, and it is a similarly *ex post facto* nature to my own readiness to respond. “I am now ready to speak!” but I can only remain alone with my thoughts. It is only after I struggle in silence with my memories, feelings, fear and shock at the student’s blithe comment about teachers that I arrive at something. I know I have gotten somewhere, but only well after the fact; it was not clear that I would be arriving there at any particular point in the description. Until this time, I am perhaps at Mayer-Drawe’s threshold, “between *no longer* and *not yet*.” It is not at all a comfortable place to be, but it is worth noting how this journey takes me from a place of relative comfort and only comes to an end when I again am returning to a place where “I can be who I am” But who I am when I return home is not the self-same person that left earlier. This is the power and ambiguity of silence and the moments of learning that can be associated with it.

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