

Embracing Silence and the Emptiness between Unspoken Words

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Abstract

This article examines the use of silence as a constructive teaching tool in the classroom rather than as a punitive measure. The author offers suggestions for the inclusion of silence to benefit students specifically in a literature high school classroom.

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“The nature of silence is unruly. It is rebellious and free of capture...” (Lees, 2012, p.1)

Usually having 23 quiet faces turned to the teacher is a good thing. The teacher has the attention of the class. But when those faces are marked with the look of total confusion, trouble is brewing. I had just asked my undergraduate Young Adult Literature class to sit in silence – a long silence, and without writing, chatting, texting or anything else distracting, to just think about a line of text that I had just read off. After the first 30 seconds, hands started to rise in the room. Meeting the eyes of my students, I shook my head “no”. They wanted to jump into conversation about the line, ready to deconstruct the text. The hands went down and they started to shift in their seats, uncomfortable.

Another few seconds passed before one young man called out, “what are we doing again?” and I replied with one word, “thinking”. He nodded and hands started to go up again. Obviously, I needed to preface the activity more. Silence made my class tense, made them fidget and made them confused. It was only a paltry minute – sixty simple seconds, but they were ready to jump in and chat in a fraction of the time. I was not ready to end the battle so quickly and we spent the remainder of the class playing with silence as a tool for teaching.

Silence in the Classroom – Beyond the Absence of Chatter

Currently, there exists a cultural disposition for talk in the classroom. This is best practice for teaching in many ways. Students are engaging with each other in productive learning environments that foster conversation for intellectual growth. These learning environments ask students to reach out to each other in a collective knowledge that is stronger than any one student. Students that are quiet are viewed negatively. They are seen as introverts with a negative connotation of the term and are deemed passive.

When teachers typically employ silence, it is often as either productive or punitive. Silence appears in several forms in the classroom. Traditionally, it is seen in the silence of productivity. Silence while students complete a task such as a test, essay or reading. Teachers also employ “wait time” for students to think after a question is posed, but often that is too quick and only for the purposes of constructing a good response and more verbal interaction. In each case, it is the teacher that controls the silence and the students respond as they have been trained over the years of academic instruction.

In other cases, silence is used to punish. Students are commanded to be quiet and the teacher uses the long pause until everyone is silent. Silence is often seen as an “uncomfortable experience” and can create tension. It is used to exert power over others and it demands respect. Teacher silence can be viewed as, “a mechanism for control and pupils’ silence as avoidance of work or sulking” (Armstrong qtd. in Ollin, 2008, 267). Silence is often used to discipline. With this understanding of silence, it becomes a space of great tension.

Our culture encourages chatter. Beloit College in the Mindset list for 2016 identifies this year’s incoming freshman as the “most tribal generation in history” (<http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/2016/>). These students are in constant contact with peers and when they are not physically with them, they are digitally. I recently attended a large forum event with freshman and as they waited for the speaker to begin, one out of three students was on the smart phone. The others were chatting with each other. Sadly, the row of professors at the back of the room was not much better as their eyes were glued to the little glowing screens. These students were uncomfortable and the phone filled a void to keep them from either sitting in silence or reaching out to chat with an unknown person next to them. Chatter, including digital chatter, fills every empty space. Steger and Besserman (2001) share a fabulous vignette that illustrates this issue in their text *Grassroots Zen*. In it, the authors write about watching a couple leave a theatre. They were holding

hands and the woman was on her cell phone. She was not engaged in the “immediate experience of the moment” (p. 26) instead she was consumed with the technology which distanced her from that time and space both mentally and physically.

This cultural context also presents in a “paradigm that values output more than inward-focused attention and values intellectual progress over inner growth” (Haskins, 2011, p.35). Our culture does not value silence or those students that flourish in such an environment that fosters silent moments. As a result, we encourage this tribal behavior and young people become more and more uncomfortable in quiet moments without the distraction of ready access media. All space becomes filled with noise, whether sounded or digital and this noise, “complies with *silencing* [italics in original] more than silence does” (Corrigan, 2011, p.9).

Rather than be viewed in a punitive understanding, silence can also be a space carved in the classroom to provide room for students to grow and become reflective learners. It can also help students develop the skills of “introspection and self-discipline” (Li, 2004, p. 69). The term *reflective* becomes cumbersome within the understanding of silence. In a Western tradition, this term denotes a focus on problem solving and analysis (Li, 2004, p.73) while within a Zen understanding there is no predetermined outcome and the use of silent reflection becomes more about mindfulness.

Yet another element of considering silence in the classroom is the benefit to some students. We fill our classrooms with noise and busy activity. This style of education, while beneficial for many students may be a challenge for those students that are introverts. In the text *Quiet: the Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, Cain (2012) points out that typical school structures are designed for extroverts. Cain notes that many introverts at a young age “become adept at acting like extroverts” (p.255). While the extroverted student may enjoy the collaborative work, this same work shuts down the introvert that would prefer a quiet activity. Finding balance is key to addressing the needs of all students in the classroom.

Silence in the Classroom

I first began playing with the use of silence in the classroom in my high school classroom. The concept fed perfectly into the text we were studying at the time, *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse. My tenth grade classes, much like the undergraduates in the opening vignette, were also confused at first. Silence was not a concept that students had experience with in the classroom other than in the predictive paradigm of punitive and productive. Knowing the lack of comfort with silence in the class, I started slowly. I asked students to enter class and remove their shoes, some stinky business to be sure, but helpful in the long run for setting the tone that this space was different. We began every class in this way throughout the text. We would begin with a short moment of contemplative silence to shake off the day and to create a new space in the classroom, a space where students could be open to new ideas without the baggage accumulated in the school day. This moment of quiet allowed students to metaphorically let go of the issues in the forefront of their minds.

Later, as we read more about Siddhartha’s quest, we attempted meditation and students kept a meditation journal. In their journals, students at first commented most often about their frustrations and feelings of discomfort in the quiet. Several noted that it never was really silent as true silence can’t be captured in a busy school with announcements, noise in the hall and our neighboring classes; this too was frustrating as they claimed they could not focus. These early surface level musings later gave way to commentary on the inability to quiet their minds, but by the close of the novel some gains were made. This was not within a religious context. It was simply an exploration of the lack of sound and the distracting noise of our daily lives.

Typically, I left the journals to be open-ended and students could write as they pleased. Several times, I gave a more directed journal. For instance, I would select a quote from the novel to write on the board. Each selected quote would lead to an essential question and discussion of the text

for the class period. Students would read the quote as part of their bell ringer work and then after their period of silence – up to five minutes, they would write in their journals opening with the quote. I would remind students that the time spent in silence was not to unravel and decode the quote, but instead to let the mind settle and be quiet, so that the unraveling could occur later while they wrote in their journals. In this way, the journals may have been called discovery journals rather than meditation journals. I did not collect the journals after the period of writing closed. I allowed students to retain the journal in case they wanted to reference it during discussion or add to it.

We also played with the idea that silence does not always mean body stillness. Students could take the moment of silence and still feel free to move. Some liked that they could take a big stretch with the moment of silence – almost like a physical shaking off of the day before we moved to another activity. We also used guided imagery on occasion to better understand a text and this was followed with longer periods of silence before students entered into conversation or free write. Yet another method we tried out was just to ring a chime to indicate a period of silence. Some of these methods worked better than others and the experimentation of methods engaged the students in conversation in which they examined what worked for them. The chime for instance was not a big hit as students thought it was juvenile. This “technique less” (Lees, 2012, p.82) method worked best in my classroom. The use of silence was new not only to my students, but to me. As Lees points out, this approach is also beneficial because they are “simple, accessible and obvious” (p.83) ways to incorporate silence into the classroom.

In my typical classroom practices, I had what I would describe as controlled chaos. My room was always busy and active. Students were often engaged in multiple activities in a brief amount of time. Over time, I came to realize that while this was a benefit for many of my students that thrived in movement, others were left in anxiety and their needs were not met. A balanced classroom also requires periods of calm. These “micro-Zen moments” (Steger & Berrerman, 2001, p. 24) helped create a classroom with better pacing and more reflectiveness. The “constant noise and stimulation is counter-productive for educational ends” and as Lees indicates, “schools should function slowly, calmly and with respect for personal inner reflection” (p. 102).

Undergraduate Experiences

Discussions of silence also occur in my undergraduate classes for English Education majors. In particular, we discuss the use of silence in the Young Adult Literature and English Methods courses. As expected, the general response when I open the conversation to discuss uses of silence in the classroom has a focus on silence as punishment or product creation. It takes some prompting to ease pre-service teachers into conceptualizing silence as a tool in their pedagogical tool belt.

One of the first activities that we do in order to play with the use of silence is in relation to the text *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. This text is fabulous for pulling samples of rich language into class analysis. I begin by asking my students to quietly select one line of text that resonates with their experiences or that speaks to them. After a few moments, we then move to hearing the statements. I ask that students one at a time and with a significant pause in between, read their statements. The room is silent except for the periods when students are reading their sentence. In the in between spaces, there is a significant pause of at least one minute or more. The first time we try this activity I do not ask that the entire class share because they become increasingly restless as the time moves on. Instead, we have about ten students share and then we discuss the process. I ask students to share with each other and then with me what the experience was like.

Another version of this was presented to me by a pre-service teacher. In this scenario, students still select their lines, but when it comes to sharing they say their lines out loud as they feel the need to speak. The interesting quality of this format is that sometimes there are very long pauses and other times voices even overlap. The power behind those words begins to change as the pre service teachers share.

Students enjoy this process for the most part. The empty spaces allow students to focus on the text and also reflect on the speaker without the pressure to perform and a mind racing ahead to what the next answer will be. When asking my students to respond to the activity, one student stated that she and her discussion partner “agreed that the silence felt a little uncomfortable at first and realized it could be a result of our lack of experience with silence in the classroom.” Another student responded that, “in the moments of silence, I literally had goose bumps. I think it is so beautiful how one piece of literature can speak to so many people...the silence was precious to everyone in the room.” Yet another student had a similar experience when she stated that she “got chills when hearing the lines and the quiet after.” Students responded both emotionally and physically to the text and were better able to select lines that resonated with the author’s craft and also with their own lives. A junior student put it well when she stated that for her “the most profound, meaningful thoughts” she had came to her in the moments of silence.

Another benefit was that students were able to reflect on lines that they may have overlooked, but that another found important. One of my junior students noted that the “exercise created a part to whole relationship, examining each line for what it means to the work as a whole.” She also noted that she liked the process because there was no waiting “for your point to become relevant” and she was able to jump in when she was ready rather than have to “depend on the tone or the direction of the full class discussion.”

Yet another way to incorporate silence is through the examination of literature that uses silence as a motif. *Speak* a popular young adult novel by Laurie Halse Anderson is a text that I use in my classroom. Discussions about the silence in the novel can lead to explorations outside the novel as well. One of my students in a recent class noted that a way to explore this could be through the use of blackout poetry. I suggest that the teacher could copy and laminate several pages of the text and then provide the students with black white board markers in order to blackout the unwanted text. In this way, the sheets could be used year after year and changes could be made easily without needing a whole new copy. Not only does this technique provide an easy access for students uncomfortable with poetry creation, but it allows us to examine what wasn’t selected and the absence of the words blacked out.

Moving Forward into Quiet Moments

Silence is easy to incorporate in the classroom. It is free and it is simple. Silence is also a technique that teachers can begin to work with in small bits. For instance, the moment of quiet contemplation of a line of text is an easy place to start. Like any skill, the use of silence is one that is developed over time and with practice in the classroom.

The use of silence can be empowering for students. If used well, it can be an opportunity for students to begin to carve out of the school day a moment to quiet the mind and ready the self for new information. It can help break up what Harste (2003) calls the “cha-cha curriculum” (p.8). In an increasingly noise filled, technology and chatter filled world, it is these moments of quiet silence that can help center a student and remind a student that they are here and can be engaged with their world rather than a pawn in it. In the English classroom, we have a unique opportunity to tie silence to literature and to push the boundaries of our teaching practices to better reach our students.

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