

TEACHING NOTE

Gaining Voice through Silence

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For educators striving to create an egalitarian classroom based on open, reflexive, and honest dialogue, silence can be the ultimate obstacle. Not only does silence stifle individual expression; more importantly, silence also prevents the collective production of knowledge, understanding, compassion, and empathy. When learners and teachers feel inhibited to give voice to their experiences, when they feel uncomfortable naming their world to others, when they worry about the interpersonal repercussions of contributing to the discourse, the possibility of the classroom as a site of personal and social transformation suffers.

As a teacher committed to critical and feminist pedagogy, I am continually seeking ways to break the silence of the classroom. I strive to create learning strategies that offer all students a safe space to voice their views and share their experiences. This is especially important because I teach sociology classes that center around the matrices of oppression: gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, religion, etc. Moreover, as a white male professor I recognize the need to de-center the structural

authority and privilege that I bring to the classroom. Cultivating a learning environment where all students feel comfortable exploring these potentially explosive issues is a pre-condition for achieving my pedagogical goals.

One strategy that I have been using for the past few years is the *Silent Discussion*. On days when we do this exercise I give students a handout with the following instructions:

For the first forty-five minutes of class we are going to try and have a *totally silent discussion*. Starting now, please refrain from any and all talking. If you have any questions try to figure them out as best as you can. We will communicate only through our writing. Please take out a piece of paper (preferably a full-size piece of paper) and write a one-paragraph answer to the question listed below. *Do not put your name on the paper and please write very clearly*. When you are finished, please put down your pen and wait for everyone else to finish. When we are all done, we will pass our papers around to the left. When we stop passing the papers, please read the paper in front

of you and then write a one-paragraph response to it. When you are finished, please put down your pen and wait for everyone else to finish. When we are all done, we will pass our papers around to the left again. When we stop passing the papers, please read the paper in front of you and then write a one-paragraph response to the original answer *and* to the response(s). We will continue in this fashion—reading, writing, and responding—until my watch alarm goes off. At that point, we will finish writing our last response and then circulate the papers until you get your original paper back (you will have to decipher this by your writing style). Read all of the responses on your paper and then write one last response to these responses. Put your pen down when you are finished. When everyone is finished we will begin a verbal discussion about the process and content of this exercise.

The question that the class writes about is generally one that I suspect will elicit varied, opposing, and quite possibly emotionally charged responses. It is also a question that is often linked to something we have read or will read in the course. For example, I have asked the class to write about whether sexist language matters (Kleinman), whether or not they are privileged in any way (McIntosh), whether their lives have been affected by the intersection of race, class, and gender (Hill Collins), and whether they feel that college fraternities degrade and exploit women (Sanday).

I find questions such as these to be crucial in helping students come to terms with the multiple layers of inequality and oppression in society. And yet, through past classroom experience it has become obvious to me that not all students feel

comfortable expressing themselves vocally on these matters. In particular, students who may have the most to offer in terms of personal experiences and perspectives are often inhibited from sharing their wisdom with the class. I have found that the silent discussion works on multiple levels to ensure that all students gain their voice. Specifically, I have found that:

- Asking the class to be quiet for an extended period of time creates a meditative ambience that is conducive to deep reflection. Students do not feel as if they must provide an answer on the spot; rather, they can contemplate what they want to say and take the time to formulate their ideas.
- Having the class comment on each other's writing creates a cumulative and diverse bank of knowledge. Inevitably, students rethink and change their original opinions after reading what their peers have written. Often, such personal transformations occur as a result of learning about someone's personal experience—an experience that they may have only felt comfortable sharing anonymously.
- The personal experiences of students become the driving force behind the theoretical conclusions we draw about structures of inequality. Students learn from each other's experiences—experiences that neither I nor a text could provide with as much legitimacy, believability, and affectivity.
- Everyone's voice is heard and authenticated. When the exercise is completed and students get back their own papers, they will be able to read a number of forthright reactions to their original comment. Even if others disagreed with them, they will have a sense of validation knowing that

their initial view resulted in a series of robust and informative responses.

In short, by giving voice to the experiences of all the students while simultaneously mitigating my own intellectual influence, the *Silent Discussion* contributes to breaking down the student-teacher contradiction and equalizing the construction of knowledge.

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