Silence as a Pedagogical Tool

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1. **Entering Into Structured Silence**. How did it feel to enter into a silent activity? How was that different to sitting in silence? What might be the benefits of this kind of process for your students?

2. **Silence for Inclusivity**.
   a. How was this way of working more inclusive - what kinds of students might this kind of process benefit?
   b. What principles of silence-based learning can you distill from this activity?
   c. How can you use this activity, or principles/tactics from this activity to bring silence-based work in your own teaching?

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We fear silence, especially in social and learning contexts (Dauenhauer, 1980; Delamont, 1983; Ollin, 2008) because we are used to an Initiation-Response-Feedback pattern for classroom interaction and discourse where silence can create awkwardness and discomfort. Teachers seek silence when they are speaking, reading that as compliance, attention, and order; but, we fear yawning silences in response to questions or in mid-discussion. We might interpret student's silence as a lack of preparedness or disengagement and rush in to fill the silence with teacher-talk. Students squirm in wait-time's discomfort, willing others to speak. Some experience silence as imposition of power and compliance: teachers are empowered with voice; students wait to be invited or directed to speak.

These difficulties with silence in classrooms reflect broader social mores of silence, especially in social and cultural settings where oral exchanges are the norm and where silent presence and interaction happen in the margins or within clearly bounded religious or spiritual practices. Silence is an aspect of human interaction that generally is invisible. Bruneau's (1973) analogy that "silence is to speech as the white of this paper is to print" (p. 18), vividly captures silence's unnoticed nature. We define silence as a lack or cessation of sound, i.e. a negative space implying its opposite. While musicians understand silence as structurally important in shaping sound (silent intervals and how we "play" them create the nuances of melody and rhythm), audiences hear sounds rather than the rests. John Cage, in his piece *4' 33* (Daniels, 2016) foregrounded this expectation of sound over silence. Similarly, we tend to conceive of participation in classrooms as speech, not silence, and so we become uncomfortable when, as with Cage's piece, silence is prolonged.

And yet, silence is integral to much of human life. Silence supports learning and understanding through inward engagement and by situating awareness in the present (Bachelard, 1960; Gadamer, 1991). Ancient wisdom traditions and modern wellness practices equally use silence to achieve goals of well-being, calm minds, and sharp focus. Why not then in college classrooms? Can silence be reframed and intentionally integrated to better support learning and a more inclusive classroom? If we integrate silence and speech as equally useful ways to participate in classrooms, we will avoid what Zembylas and Michaelidas (2004) call the marginalization of silent voices.

Contemplative methods (Barzebat & Bush, 2013; Coburn, 2013; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Rechtschaffen, 2014) foster emotional balance, focus, attention, and metacognition and offers us strategies for a positive and productive integration of silence as a pedagogical tool. Using silence, we can help students find calm, focus, and engagement in learning, something all students need, especially given the often fragmented and busy lives they lead. At the same time, when we integrate silence in active learning, we also make space for the inclusion of all voices who might not normally engage in a speaking privileged teaching and learning context. As Schultz (2010) describes it, we will be able to think of silence in classrooms not as void of communication, but as a space for thinking and expression.

BENEFITS of Using Silence as a Pedagogical Tool

1. **Engagement and Focus**. Entering the lesson or a new part of a lesson by grounding, disengaging from distractors, and connecting with oneself.

2. **Processing input**. Thinking time to review material presented, connect to prior knowledge and lived experiences.

3. **Metacognition.** Time for reflecting on what is being learned (metacognitive knowledge) and how learning is happening (metacognitive regulation).

4. **Deep Listening.** Paying attention to what is shared verbally, thinking about what is not said.

5. **Question Finding**. Reviewing and exploring material to find and ask good questions.

6. **Empowering and Including:** Time for translation, composing of self and ideas in order to participate especially for shy students and English Language learners.

PRINCIPLES for Using Silence

1. **Pre-alert and structure the use of silence**. Since silence is awkward in many social and educational spaces, be explicit ahead of time about using silence. This gives silence "permission" and students can then do the work rather than wonder and be uncomfortable with the silence.

2. **Explicitness. Signal the start and end of any silent work process.** Reduce awkwardness by explicitly signaling when the silent process will end and why you are doing a silent activity. Timing the process helps as well: "Let's use silence to give this more thought. For the next minute, I want you to close your eyes, and think about 2 questions we should explore. I'll let you know when the minute is up." This creates certainty so that students can engage in the process without anxiety.

3. **Edge in to silence.** Since silence is usually uncomfortable, introduce this classroom engagement variable in small steps, bringing in silent thinking, response, or creation of work in short bursts of silent time that are clearly signaled and timed. This helps students become accustomed to engaging with silence. As they get used to this mode of working, you will be able to extend silent work processes and get even more effective engagement and quality of work.

IDEAS for Using Silence

1. **Silent brainstorming.** In brainstorming ideas, dominant voices and groups can prevent great ideas from being shared by shyer students or non-native users of English. Silent generation of ideas, either solo or in a group helps create a more equitable space for all to contribute. This can be done in a number of ways.

    a. **Silent individual work**. Sit and think silently – download ideas to a sheet of paper – then speak or write to share with the class.

    b. **Silent pair or group work.** In pairs or groups, students generate ideas by writing and responding to each other only through writing rather than speaking.

    c. **Silent sharing and extending.** Extend the sharing with the class to a silent writing activity on a shared Google document or wiki page. Students can add their ideas and also be instructed to select and extend (do a "yes … and") one idea from a classmate.

2. **Silent opening summary**. This activity is done before the main work for the class begins, especially if there was preparation work or readings assigned to be completed before class. This process helps with checking and reinforcing class preparation, helps students to "arrive" mentally and emotionally to focus on the topics that will be explored in the lesson.

    a. Ask students to summarize key ideas from their assigned reading in silence. This can be done solo and then shared in a quick discussion or quiz, or have students do the activity on the whiteboard so that as each student adds ideas, others read and add to what is on the board or make corrections. This also brings in some peer teaching so that those who are less prepared and have had trouble with the material can learn through this process.

    b. Remember to give clear instructions so students have permission to add or offer corrections in silence through writing.

    c. This is a great opportunity to observe and assess your students' level of preparedness and can reach out to those you notice are struggling.

    d.   You can also use this silent summary and review method during the lesson if you assign things to read during class, or after you have done a lecture chunk.

3. **Pause to create thinking time.** Giving students permission to sit in silence and think about something helps focus attention on information you just provided. This especially helps students who are easily distracted or who have struggled to follow you. It also helps you chunk your teaching so that you are scaffolding their knowledge construction rather than just providing a stream of input.

    a. Explicitly mark off time in which students may reflect on something that was just discussed or mid-lecture after you have just given them a lot of information.

    b. Provide a very specific thinking task so students have a focus for their thinking. Rather than asking "any questions?" and getting the expected silence, use silence to generate focused thought.

4. **Silence for building connections.** Often, in teaching and learning, we are engaged in gathering information and constructing knowledge. We can use silence to make meaningful connections to emotions, lived experience, and prior knowledge explicit. Allowing students to do this in their own spaces in silence helps remove the usual barriers of delving into personal meaning in a (public) classroom situation. At the end, you can allow students who are willing to speak a chance to share their responses or ask students to write or draw a response.

   a. Use silent thinking time to reflect on personal connections to a topic. We just looked at world events surrounding climate change. For the next minute, think about how this makes you feel as a young person looking into the future. What feelings come up, what actions do you see are important?"

   b. Use silent thinking time to make connections to previous topics and prior knowledge. Think about our topic today about English landscape and industrialization. Can you think of imagery from the Romantic poets we read last week that connect with this topic? You have 3 minutes to come up with a few examples."

   c. It is important to follow the thinking time with a chance to download and capture their thoughts. Invite students to write or visualize (drawing, making a visual model or flow chart) their thoughts and ideas.

   d. Having thought and captured their thoughts on paper, it is easier for students to articulate and share their ideas. This is especially the case for students who are shy and/or non-native users of English.

5. **Silence to change gears.** Use silence as a structuring tool to help signal transitions to the next chunk of your lesson and to consolidate before you move on.

   a. **Mid lecture or discussion review.** Pause in a lecture chunk or at a key point in a discussion. Instruct students to represent what you just said in a graphic or visual manner (constructing understanding), or draw a response (making personal connections – creating meaningful engagement).

   b. **Post-group work consolidation.** At the end of a group discussion, have students sit in silence to think about key points from discussion, then make some notes individually. You can also do group silent recapitulation by asking students to write a key point on a sheet of paper, pass it to the next student who adds to it, until there are no more ideas to add (this can also be done by having students write on a large post-it, passing the pen from one to the other in silence. This also supports shy and non-native users of English.

6. **Silent listening/viewing to close lessons.** Create a class ritual of silent listening in community where the emphasis is just on making meaningful connections through experience and where nothing else is expected. This also brings in a neat and grounded closure to your lesson where students make final connections and gather themselves before moving on to the next thing.

   a. At the end of the lesson, make time to read aloud, show a video/images, or play a song about something related directly or tangentially to the class. Using a different form - a poem, thought provoking quotes, an op-ed or blog entry, a piece of current news, historical letters etc. - also introduces a different texture and set of connections that can help ground a topic.

b. At the end, sit in silence for a short while. Then dismiss. Nothing need be said, asked, or exchanged. This is pure giving and receiving. If you use class journals, you can invite them to respond in their journals.

If this becomes a classroom routine, you can eventually have different students elect to bring something to share if they like so that the giving and receiving is co-created with students.

7. **Exit Tickets. Grounding learning at the end of class.** Ask students to write a brief response to a consolidating question that you post on a slide as an Exit Ticket. Students do this task in silence, waiting quietly until all students are done, and then leave for their next thing.

    a. Play some non-distracting music to help focus the silent activity.

    b. Structure the time - tell students how much time they have and sound a signal to end their Exit Ticket time.

    c. It is important that students who finish sooner wait quietly till the signal to end is sounded so that all students leave together. Leaving individually disrupts focus for those still writing, while leaving together creates a stronger sense of completion for the group.

    d. You do not have to grade the Exit Tickets, but it is important to review briefly so that you can address them in the next class to signal to them you have read and value their responses and especially if you need to address gaps.
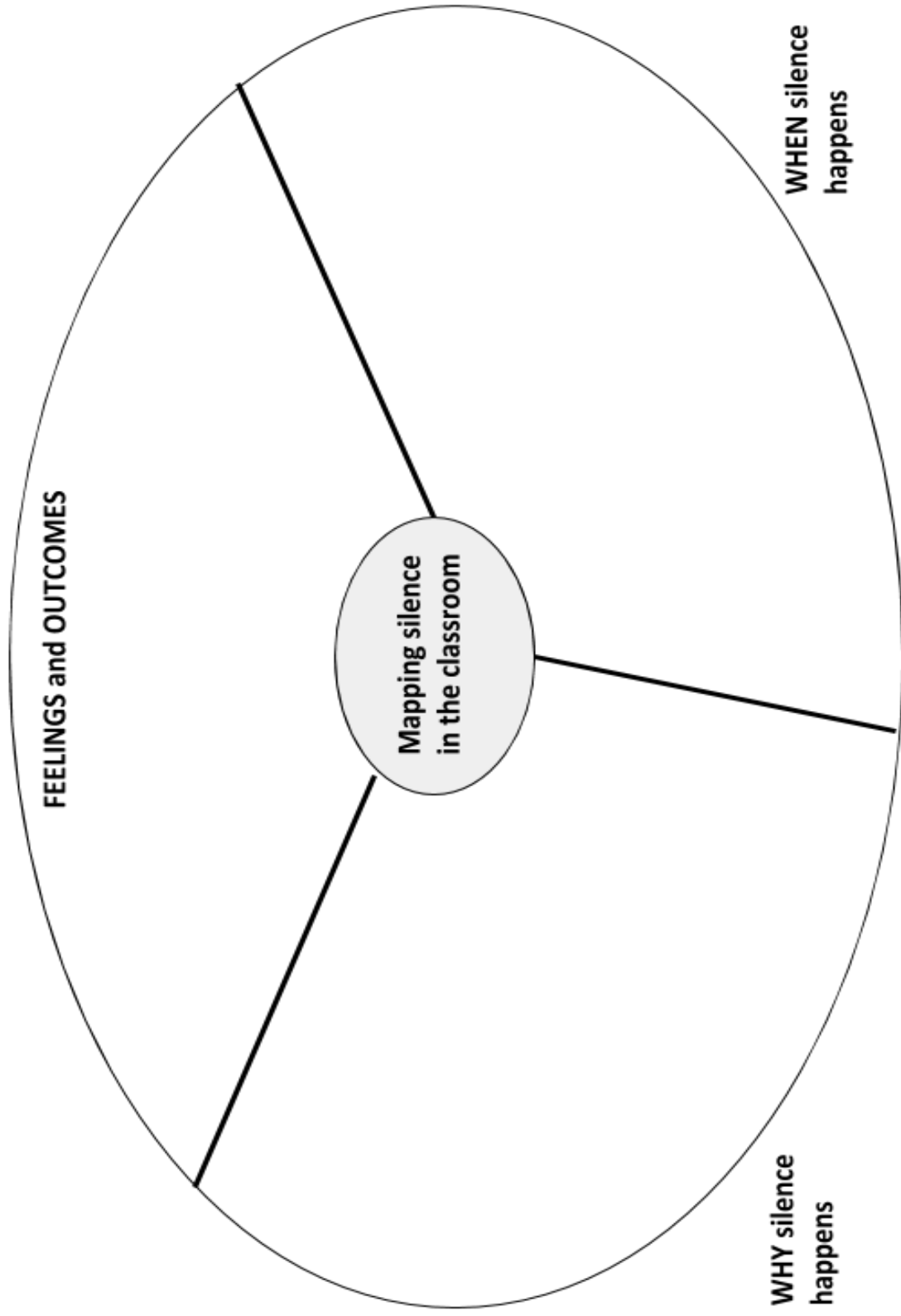
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Silence as a Pedagogical Tool – DEFAULT

FEELINGS and OUTCOMES

Mapping silence
in the classroom

WHEN silence
happens

WHY silence
happens

Silence as a Pedagogical Tool - INTENTIONAL

WHEN silence
happens

FEELINGS and OUTCOMES

Mapping silence
in the classroom

WHY silence
happens