

Teaching, Listening, and Generative Silence

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TWO MEN ARE SITTING in a room. They do not speak. After a moment, one says, “Well!” The other says nothing. As a record of a conversation, this story appears empty.¹ A listener cannot even begin to guess what it means. Yet the silence is not silent. Contextualized with shared knowledge and relationships, the narrative “blanks” can be filled in thus: The two men are Russians. They look out a window and see that it is snowing. They are both aware that it is May, rather late for snow, and the fact is that they, along with most Russians, are more than ready for Spring to arrive. They thus share a bitter disappointment in the weather, leading one man to utter an emotion-laden “Well!” The other man feels no need to respond.

Authentic, attentive listening understands the importance of contexts and relationships and the potential richnesses of silence. There are silences that are not merely absences of speaking but rather in themselves meaningful, fertile, or generative. They “fill the room,” as the saying goes. Something is happening—anything might happen—in such silences. We might call these *speaking silences*. There are also silences that are empty. We might call these *silent silences*. They suggest absence, withdrawing, or withholding, perhaps as a result of disinterest, boredom, frustration, or force. Such silences might be unchosen, a result of the powerful silencing the vulnerable and attempting to keep their voices unheard. They might also be chosen, a deliberate response to the realities of power and relationships, an assertion of agency that by means of silence upends social norms or expectations.

The purpose of this essay is to explore differences between speaking silences and silent silences and to frame these understandings in terms of classroom teaching. This inquiry revolves around such questions as: What are the differences between generative and non-generative silences? What about good listening helps create and interpret spaces for speaking silences versus silent silences? How and why? How might these understandings work out in the classroom and in teacher-student relationships? These are important but difficult questions. In the very act of defining terms, the apparent binary opposition of “speaking silences” and “silent silences,” while useful in beginning to map the territory, is potentially misleading and cannot be rigidly maintained. If silence is a deliberately chosen response, for example, then that “silent” silence signifies or “says” something, even if that “something” is opaque apart from being an act of resistance. Schultz (2009) thus explores the multiple modes, purposes, and meanings of classroom silences, including silence as a form of classroom participation. Listening to and for

silence cannot then be seen as a simple matter of power or lack of power, voice or lack of voice. Glenn (2004) comments:

[S]ilence is too often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power: when it denotes alertness and sensitivity, when it signifies attentiveness or stoicism, and particularly when it allows new voices to be heard...Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power. It all depends. (p. 18)

To say “It all depends” is not to dismiss or trivialize but rather to emphasize and respect the complexity of the issues surrounding silence, that is, to acknowledge that distinctions between speaking silences and silent silences can be uncertain, blurred, and fraught with paradox. Even generative silences might have unintended, double-edged consequences.

Speaking Silences

Exploring silence and its contingencies, this essay begins from Schultz’s (2011) dictum that “Silence marks the boundaries of words and thought” (Exploring the Meanings of Classroom Silence section, para. 2). 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. It might indicate a recognition that wisdom at times prefers silence, as when sages are silent before questions or the innocent keep silent in the face of accusations. By contrast, Americans and especially American academics, myself included, are pervasively socialized to perceive and feel silence as “bad” and voice as “good.” In the field of English language teaching (ELT), for example, a growing body of sociocultural literature (Harumi, 2011) examines silence as a dimension of student reticence, a source of classroom conflict, and a barrier to language learning. Yet the realities are more complex. The simplistic idea that silence is an emptiness, an absence, or a “deficit” that is best filled or overcome must be rejected (Reda, 2010a, 2010b).

An everyday example of speaking silence is the engaged silence of friendship. When one friend genuinely listens to another, the act of listening creates a space within which the friend feels invited to share, confide, and think out loud. Such listening is more than waiting patiently for one’s turn to speak, and more than finding some commonality in experience (as if empathy required “I felt the same as you when I...” statements). It is a caring and humble investment in constructing personal silence within which a friend, or any person to whom one chooses to pay real attention, feels heard and understood. Depth in human relationships and community is often built upon this kind of listening and these kinds of silences. Rud and Garrison (2011) thus refer to the virtue of *reverent listening*: “Reverent listening is the recognition of the need for aid and sustenance by others and the good of human relationship and communion” (Introduction section, para. 3). This is the opposite of listening in which others are regarded or treated merely as a “backdrop for that autobiography in which inevitably I am the hero” (Smith, 1996, p. 8). As Garrison and Rud (2009) explain:

Both the dominant teacher and the dominant student are irreverent because they do not

respect or show interest in the words and silences of the other. They only have time and attention for themselves. They are both deceived into thinking that they know better than the other and thus have no need for the other's views. (p. 2643)

To put it in moral terms, irreverent listeners are self-centered, self-deceived, and prideful. They do not believe they need or will be enriched by the perspectives of others. Reverent listeners, on the other hand, attempt to listen with openness and humility. Garrison (2011) uses the term “self-eclipse” (para. 5) to capture this listening orientation, meaning that good listeners choose a temporary “loss of significance, power, or prominence in relation to another person” (para. 6). To give preference to others through listening (silence) is to “join with them in the joys of creation, while listening compassionately is to join them in the suffering. Both experiences often lie beyond the bounds of what words alone can ever tell” (para. 28). Silence thus bears a capacity to speak and listen at the same time and to do so both within and without language. This is not weakness or absence; there is no deficit or vacuum to be filled. Silences can speak and give others freedom to speak.

Fiumara (1990) provides a philosophical foundation for understanding the generative potentials of silence. She describes silence as a phenomenon that creates and inhabits actual time and space—as it does so, the time and space inhabited make room for new languages and voices. Room needs to be made because of the “relentless concert of the logos-in-progress,” or more simply, the “din” of multimedia and social connectivity (p. 95). Because of the contemporary lack of silence, we can hardly even choose to hear ourselves and others. We live instead in a state of “benumbment.” Cultivating silence as a refuge from all the noise, or better, as a foundation for a more committed engagement with identity and otherness, is a kind of “philosophical fast” which purifies the soul (p. 97). This is not to say that all silences are generative. If they are wielded as weapons with which to silence others and avoid hearing, they can close off relationships and marginalize others. Yet (Fiumara, 1990):

In its creative function, silence basically represents a way of being *with* the interlocutor; it indicates, that is, a proposed interaction, an invitation to the development of a time-space in which to meet, or clash, in order to share in the challenge of growth. (p. 101)

To conceive of and practice silence as a form of fasting, an avenue of purification, or a way of being fully present in this sense is to remove headphones and cellphones, scripts and teleprompters, in order to open up spaces within which anyone might say anything, or not. That which silence generates need not be expressed in words.

This is why in addition to listening as a form of silence, the idea of speaking silences includes listening *to* silence. Many years ago as a camp counselor, I led campers, who were mostly 8-12-year-old boys there for one week, on nature walks in the beautiful forests of eastern Pennsylvania. At the point in every walk when we were furthest from the main camp facilities, the group stopped and participated in a sensory enhancement exercise (Baurain, 2000). Two of the boys were assigned to be ears, two to be hands, two to be eyes, and one to be a nose. For 5-10 minutes, they were, while remaining stationary, to *be* one of their physical senses. Without distractions, what could they hear or touch or see or smell? In the world of young boys, 5-10 minutes of standing still is an eternity, but if I enforced the first minute consistently they were usually drawn into the moment. For many, it was perhaps the first time they had paid real attention to the natural setting, as opposed to hurrying excitedly from rifle range to dining hall to

archery range to swimming pool. Debriefing afterwards about their concrete sensory perceptions was always the highlight of the walk. The boys were amazed at all they could hear or touch or see or smell once they entered into the silence and stillness the exercise requests. They could not always put their observations and feelings into words, but they rarely failed to convey an enthused sense of the weight and significance of the inner and outer silences they had inhabited for those few minutes.

Silence and spirituality are tellingly linked in the philosophical and pedagogical literature. Schoonmaker (2009), for example, led her doctoral students in a phenomenological study of children's classroom spirituality, but at first they thought they had failed to find any. Only when they set aside the "noise" of their research expectations, observations, and interpretations and read through the session transcripts in silence did they sense in conversations and events that had taken place a spirituality they had missed in the moment. Only in and through silence and openness did they succeed in being present with the children and become witnesses to the spiritual moments and discoveries the children had experienced.

Spiritual or religious persons particularly understand this idea of listening to silence or of inner attentiveness to the ineffable. Christian *lectio divina* or listening prayer, for example, has four stages, two of which involve speaking and two silence (Jones, 2003). First there is an oral reading of scripture, a sermon, or another devotional passage, followed by a time of meditation. Then there are spoken prayers, concluded with a period of silent contemplation. During the silences, it is all too easy for the mind to wander, unaccustomed as people are to having or making space for inner listening, but in time the stillness and silence can become a welcome spiritual discipline (Foster, 1992). Similarly, Smith (1996) writes of the Eastern tradition of *jhana*, in which

the aim is to achieve a kind of stillness of heart and mind through ritual stopping of intellectual and cognitive habits...In the condition of stillness, it becomes possible to hear new sounds, or old sounds in a new way, appreciate tastes once numbed out by old habits of taste, see a child, spouse, partner, parent, in a way that honors them more fully, instead of constrained by the usual fears, desires, and projections. (p. 10)

Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) discuss silence as important in both Christian and Buddhist religious practice. In the Christian tradition of *via negativa*, language stands inadequate before the infiniteness of God (pp. 197-199). Silence is an appropriate and meaningful response for expressing such a perception or experience, as well as a release from needing to do so. In this case, silences speak of awe and transcendence. In Buddhism, the silence of a master teacher deflects the burden of response to others, absorbing questions while at the same time opening up spaces in which people are able to consider their own questions within themselves (pp. 204-205). This kind of silence models the appropriateness of humility and wordlessness before "the silence of being or life itself" (p. 199).

Silent Silences

Listening as silence and listening to silence, then, show the generative potential of speaking silences. But we would be negligent not to acknowledge that silence can also signify marginalization, disempowerment, or disenfranchisement. In silence, stereotyped assumptions

can be made about others and opportunities for learning can be ignored, avoided, or even destroyed. When poet Thylia Moss (1995) was a child, for example, she moved from one neighborhood and school to another in the fourth grade. In her first school, she was seen as an intelligent child who studied French, played the violin, and led her classmates in reenacting a women's suffrage march. In her new school, however, she was seen only in stereotyped terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status:

I almost immediately went from being an outgoing, popular girl to a withdrawn, shy, almost invisible girl. I don't know for sure why I stopped talking, why I would not speak up for myself and did not learn to do so again until I was in college, but it seems likely that it had to do with the way I was judged in the new school without my even opening up my mouth once...[The teachers] did not know, did not ask, and I did not tell, although I could have. Now a grown woman with children, I still want to be a concert violinist but can't get past how fulfillment of a dream was so easily fractured by assumptions that a little black girl was somehow not as capable as paler children being educated in a better, more affluent public school. (p. 8)

Moss's silence, which she represents as both forced *and* chosen, was silent in many ways: She did not speak up in class. Her voice did not contribute to her teachers' and classmates' learning. Her dream of being a concert violinist was aborted. The teachers' silence—the questions they did not ask and the ignorance to which they were blind—was costly to themselves as well. They remained oblivious to the unique “other” in their midst. Thankfully, Moss preserved her voice through writing, and as a poet is in fact now known for the power of her public readings.

The issue of silencing hits immigrant students and English language learners (ELLs) with particular force. Language proficiency inevitably connects with larger issues of culture, identity, and power. As Olsen's (1997) research highlights, the barriers facing ELLs are formidable: Some are inherent in language learning, namely the fact that academic English takes much longer to acquire than social or conversational English. Some the students might bring with them, such as a low level of education or literacy in their home language. Some might be systemic, such as poorly structured programs or teachers who are untrained in pedagogy that includes both language and academic content. And some might be a result of linguistic or ethnic prejudice, in part because the average American is monolingual, does not spend much time learning foreign languages, and is often suspicious of them. These factors tend to conspire toward silencing immigrant students. If they cannot understand what teachers or classmates say, or other students make fun of their accents, or they are unable to express their ideas in English, then they keep their mouths shut. For these reasons, the students in Olsen's (1997) study often felt disrespected, weak, and invisible, and these feelings negatively affected their academic motivation and achievement. This silencing of immigrant students extends in some situations to the actual barring of their home languages from ELL classrooms through teachers' rules or even district-level policies.

Depending on age and education, some immigrant students actually lose proficiency in their home languages—a silence which profoundly affects personal identity and family relationships. When a child no longer understands the “mother tongue” in and through which he or she was raised, a part of that child's heritage is erased or silenced, perhaps irrecoverably. Fillmore (1991) concludes:

What is lost is no less than the means by which parents socialize their children: When parents are unable to talk to their children, they cannot easily convey to them their values, beliefs, understandings, or wisdom about how to cope with their experiences. (p. 343)

Fossilized interlanguages may come to characterize other immigrant students, who emerge as not comfortably proficient in any language (p. 345). Kouritzin (1999) similarly depicts the consequences of home language loss in areas including family and community relationships, self-image and cultural identity, school relationships, and school performance or academic achievement.

Ironically, listening pedagogy in language education often exacerbates the problem of silencing. Listening proficiency is treated almost exclusively as a function or skill, the purpose of which is to generate products or outcomes desired by language users. Though listening is rhetorically acknowledged to be an active and complex process of making meanings within contexts and relationships, in practice language teacher education and pedagogical discourse treat listening simply as a linguistic transaction and listening pedagogy as a technical and instrumental process of skill-building, with the goal of enabling learners fluently to perform such transactions. I have written elsewhere of the inadequacy of this means-to-ends orientation for instructing language learners in genuine listening (Baurain, 2011). In my experience, such “communicative” pedagogy often leaves English language learners better at speaking than listening. Although students are able to express their needs and desires, authentic listening skills lag behind and the world in a sense remains silent to them.

For students in general, classroom management concerns can too easily become another means of silencing. This is the effect of employing order and discipline not as necessary features of a fruitful learning environment but as tools for rigidly controlling students’ actions and interactions. Schultz (2011) notes that with reference to classroom management teachers interpret silence as order and obedience, while with reference to participation they interpret silence as rooted in a lack of knowledge or interest. This is why they often “ignore silence or try to replace it with talk without taking the time to understand its range of meanings and consequences” (para. 2). We might say that some teachers are trying to silence silence. Everyday classroom management practices that carry a literal or figurative silencing effect include asking display questions, discouraging talking between activities or in neutral spaces (such as hallways), assigning a large quantity of individual deskwork, requiring permission to be given for even the most trivial actions (such as sharpening a pencil), and stating or implying that informal collaboration is cheating or dishonesty.

Generative Silences in Classrooms

A former teacher of mine used to say, “You’ve got two ears and one mouth for a reason. You’re meant to listen twice as much as you talk!” This was not very original, but nonetheless she was correct. Research has found that while people speak at a rate of about 250 words per minute, they are capable of listening at more than three times that rate. Brady (2003) suggests that this cognitive gap is a space within which active listening can be “creatively kindled” (p. 110). How might these understandings work out in the classroom and in teacher-student relationships? Especially in light of the subtle and everpresent dangers of silent silences (see Schultz, 2003, p. 113, Table 5.1, “Patterns of Silencing”), how might teachers cultivate,

encourage, recognize, and learn to live with(in) speaking silences? What qualities of listening might avoid non-generative silences while at the same time enabling generative silences?

Thayer-Bacon (2004) highlights both the importance of teacher listening and its difficulty:

In a caring relationship, teachers must focus their efforts on valuing and appreciating students' needs and learning what their interests and desires are. Teachers should, as far as possible, suspend their own beliefs, feelings, and values and listen attentively and generously to their students. (p. 168)

This is the listening orientation which Garrison (2011) refers to as “self-eclipse” (para. 5). But why must one set oneself aside in order to listen well? Because self-centeredness is an enemy to caring. In Thayer-Bacon's (2004) words: “This effort of attending to the needs of others helps assure us that the teaching-student relationship will be a caring one, and not one that is manipulative or harmful to the student or teacher” (p. 168). Further, such listening “will help [students] develop their own voice and learn how to express it, for they can feel confident that others will listen generously. And they will be able to learn from other [diverse] students' voices as well” (p. 171). That is to say, teacher listening begets student listening: When teachers genuinely listen to students, students are freed to listen to one another and the overall learning process is expanded and deepened.

This kind of generative listening runs against the grain of the status quo in education (Smith, 1996):

Children in today's classrooms have virtually no time to simply dream, wait, think, ponder, or learn to be still. There is so little opportunity to find one's original face, because every space is seen to require some sort of instrumental intervention. (p. 11)

The current trend is unfortunately even more in this direction, as high-stakes standardized assessments remain the centerpiece of politicized school reform efforts. By contrast, within the classroom dynamics envisioned by Smith (1996), Thayer-Bacon (2004), myself (Baurain, 2010), and others, the engaged silence of listening is fully as, if not more important than, words and actions. As Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) explain:

When silence has a place in the classroom, the topography and opportunity for communication changes. Silence can be colonized by talk, of course, but meaning cannot. While talk operates as a system of utterances, there are also systems of silences—structures in which silence can be as effective a tool of signification as utterance. Thus silence always carries with it the potential for resistance and critique. The very fact of silence can subvert the dominance of a discourse that privileges talk. To allow space for silence in the classroom when one deals with the unspeakable is an important step in reaching toward the Other. (p. 207)

In other words, to treat silence as a thing in itself, a living phenomenon occupying space and time—as Fiumara (1990) does—is to change the rules and broaden the scope of communication and meaning. Silence expands the possibilities, even at times doubling back on itself to complicate matters. When considering the “unspeakable,” for example, an overabundance of words might suppress meaning and subvert learning. Words might obscure where silences would

reveal; they might hide what silences would discover. Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) use the example of the Holocaust to make this point—above I use the example of Moss (1995) for the same purpose. The “noise” of her teachers—that is, their lack of listening and attentiveness because they thought they already knew who she was—prevented them from truly “reaching toward the Other.” Their words and assumptions obscured her identity, certainly to themselves and even (temporarily) to herself. Their silent assumptions were not attentive or generative, but instead constituted attempts to silence and suppress the poet’s voice. Moss’s (1995) own silence, at first a hurtful consequence of her teachers’ actions in a specific sociocultural context, developed into a strong critique of the dominant discourse, one that in written form is a hard-won “reaching toward the Other.” Such narratives and processes resist neat summaries, but perhaps it can be said that pedagogical actions need generative silence as a ground for being and becoming: Action craves stillness and speaking craves silence in a paradoxical, yin-yang rhythm and relationship.

Pragmatically, speaking silences make room for hearing and learning what is new and different. “When you listen to a student,” Rud (1995) observes, “the student becomes the teacher. This reversal of roles is important for teachers to realize, to allow their own learning, and to put oneself in the role of the student” (p. 121). In practice, however, this happens all too infrequently. Teacher questions are often either storefront display questions or mere set-ups for set-piece answers given by teachers themselves. Gregory (2006) admonishes that the apparent invitation of a question raised for class discussion tends to be an invitation mainly to ourselves as teachers. We frame a question in the sincere belief that generative space is being created for group thinking and discussion, but as students well know, we are likely to be setting the table with our own favorite dishes:

[W]e ask few questions to which we do not already know four different answers that we are eager to explain. Moreover, study after study shows that most college teachers wait less than a second after asking a question before they start answering it themselves, which clearly indicates that teachers are the most eager answerers in the room. (Gregory, 2006, p. 313)

Students do not usually complain about this, for they are well socialized into such classroom rituals. Silences make them uncomfortable, too. They might even feel embarrassed for the teacher, with both teacher and students interpreting silence as pedagogical failure. To make room for generative silences calls for a willed commitment to creating and allowing them and to interpreting them as good.

One way in which to promote speaking silences in classrooms is through communal silence routines or exercises. Nelson (2001), for example, begins her poetry classes at West Point with five minutes of silent meditation: “They turn off the lights, loosen their ties; some of them take off their shoes and sit cross-legged on the floor. I set the timer. We close our eyes; we enter silence” (p. 548). She also assigns as homework fifteen additional minutes of meditation per day. Out of this silence and meditation her military cadet and veteran students write journal entries and poems, not infrequently about the experience of silence itself. In addition to journaling, she uses freewriting and clustering as primary writing strategies within her “contemplative pedagogy.” For Nelson (2006), “contemplative pedagogy” is all about learning to listen to and for silence (p. 1733). Her interest in this way of teaching springs unsurprisingly, given the connections already drawn in this essay, from her interest in contemplative prayer. Her mentor,

Abba Jacob, has said, “The goal of all prayer is silence,” meaning that the purpose of prayer is to prepare ourselves against “the noise of our lives” not only to speak but also to hear (p. 1734). This links directly to the religious practices previously discussed of *lectio divina*, *via negativa*, *jhana*, and the discipline of silence.

The communal silences which Nelson (2001, 2006) seeks to create in her poetry classes spring from a recognition that generative pedagogical silences are built on teachers’ personal silences, that is, their ability to listen to themselves. As with genuinely listening to students, this, too, is exceedingly difficult. It requires attentiveness and humility and courage: “A whole life is gathered into a moment of silence...Not for nothing do we flee from silence, the only thing that confronts us with our own life. It recapitulates it for us there, in that instant, entirely present” (Sciacca, 1963, cited in Fiumara, 1990, p. 105). Rud (1995) recognizes that this ability to brave silence and listen to oneself is “a tragic goal in that it can never be fully achieved, and...an ironic goal in that it has to be attempted at all” (p. 122). Fiumara (1990) similarly speaks of silence as an “inner virtual condition to which we can aspire as well as a precondition for further development” (p. 104). The borders between speech and silence turn out to be far more fluid than we might have imagined. Silence emerges as at once a condition and a precondition, an ability and an aspiration, a process of learning and a purpose of learning. It is in a sense both the journey and the destination. When we as teachers say we are “lifelong learners,” cultivating silences must then be part of what we mean.

Silence and “Amplified Learning”

The truth that silences can generate learning is seen in one college teacher’s experience that began as a technical challenge: Kirschner (2008), who was undergoing a midlife hearing loss, recounts what happened when a sound-field system was installed in her classroom to enable her to continue her discussion-based teaching style. A sound-field system is designed to amplify speech and distribute sound evenly throughout a room. Microphones are used and must be passed from speaker to speaker. Not only was the technology successful enough for her to maintain her preferred way of teaching, but it also provided an unanticipated benefit for her students—“their learning was amplified” (para. 2). Students who had previously been shy or uninterested in volunteering in class felt encouraged and empowered to do so because the microphone gave them confidence that others were actually listening. One student even said the system made her feel smarter because it caused her to listen more closely to herself. The pauses necessitated by the passing of the microphones became silences or spaces within which people reflected on what had just been said, leading to comments that built on one another to form meaningful conversations. As one student put it, “[T]he delay between speakers provides time for contemplation” (para. 11). Kirschner (2008) observes that the microphones thus became “a catalyst for a striking mindfulness” (para. 6) and that “students were unusually attentive: listening to each other with real care, making extremely thoughtful and increasingly articulate contributions” (para. 7). On a midterm evaluation, one wrote, “[W]e all really listen to whoever is speaking and the mics promote a respectful and organized environment” (para. 8). Another noted, “I can hear myself think, so I find myself articulating my thoughts better” (para. 9). Kirschner (2008) concludes: “[A]mplification seemed to activate many students’ reflective and meta-cognitive capacities, giving them a concomitant sense of power and control in relation to their own learning” (para. 13). In her classroom, spaces for silence and the rhythms of silence

and speech contributed immeasurably to the learning experience.

I compare this with some shame to a small group discussion I conducted recently in one of my undergraduate teacher education courses. I organized the discussion in small groups so that there would be no possibility of myself or only a few students dominating the turn-taking. I explained the discussion's goals, handed out a few prompt questions, and was soon enjoying the buzz of conversation that filled the room. Students appeared to be engaged with the topic, and the percentage of students participating was high. I felt pleased...until I actually began to listen. What I heard was more a "festival of opinions" than a true discussion. One student would share a thought, then another would do so, then another, with only loose topical connections among comments and little indication that the participants were actually listening to one another. They often interrupted one another, talked over one another, or assumed they had heard or understood a point when in fact they had not grasped part or all of it. In response to that experience, I have been experimenting on occasion with discussions in which the pacing and turn-taking are more structured. From my perspective, structure alters discussions in ways similar to the sound-field system in Kirschner's (2008) classroom. It slows things down, creates a rhythm of words and silences, promotes more attentiveness with less anxiety, and opens up spaces within which fresh voices can be heard.

Conclusion

Pedagogical silences are rich (burdened) with potential—anything might happen. As a discipline of silence is established in his classroom, Palmer (1993) reports:

Eventually my students feel a sense of community in the silence that is deeper than what they feel when the words are flowing fast and hard. Words so often divide us, but silence can unite. In the silence we are more likely to sense the unity of truth which lies beneath our overanalyzed world, the relatedness between us and others and the world we inhabit and study. (p. 81)

Yet generative pedagogical silences are difficult, intricate, and perplexing to recognize and interpret, not to mention that the possibility of oppressive silencing is always lurking behind even good intentions. Words and speech are comparatively easier to grasp, and the dangers they present more readily perceived and critiqued, or so teachers seem to feel and believe. The fact is that as teachers we are simply more invested in the "talking business" than in speaking silences, however generative (Reda, 2010a, 2010b). We talk and we want our students to talk, all of them. Talking shows learning. Words communicate ideas. Voice means power. Silences are felt as absences—absences of learning, of ideas, of power—that must be filled with (vocal) presences. Deficits must be made up, gaps must be closed.

These understandings are why making room for generative silences calls for a willed commitment to creating and allowing them and to interpreting them as good. How willed? Palmer (1998) hints at the arduous importance of the choice. In his classic *The Courage to Teach*, he presents six paradoxes that he sees as essential in teaching and learning spaces. The sixth paradox is, "The space should welcome both silence and speech" (p. 77). Leading a seminar on this very topic, he inevitably arrived at a period of silence. Despite his commitment to the paradox and to spiritual silence as a teacher discipline, he narrates a nearly overpowering

psychological urge to fill the silence with words:

As the seconds tick by and the silence deepens, my belief in the value of silence goes on trial. Like most people, I am conditioned to interpret silence as a symptom of something gone wrong. I am the salaried leader of this classroom enterprise, and I live by an ethic of professional responsibility, so in the silence my sense of competence and worth is at stake: I am the one who must set right what has gone wrong—by speaking. Panic catapults me to the conclusion that the point just made or the question just raised has left students either dumbfounded or bored, and I am duty-bound to apply conversational CPR. (p. 82)

The choice facing him is complex. Though he mocks the application of “conversational CPR,” perhaps speech is what is needed in order to move the conversation along. Then again, perhaps words will only silence the voices of thoughtful seminar participants who are preparing to speak, and Palmer should allow the generative silence time to do its work. Then again, perhaps the participants will perceive the silence as a failure and give up on the conversation, or perhaps the silence will grow into an oppressiveness that silences would-be speakers. How can he know for sure? He cannot, but still he must choose. Something is going to happen next, whether words or silence or something else, and as the seminar leader the initiative is his to take, or not. In the end, the differences between “speaking silence” and “silent silence” may not be readily apparent; in fact, potentials for both might exist and be realized in the same situation. 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.

Given that silence is a double-edged sword, then, is it enough to advise listening to silence without promoting silence itself? This is the position taken by Schultz (2011):

Leaving room for silence is a potentially dangerous path to follow because it might be interpreted as a way to exclude individuals or groups of students from participation in classrooms. Rather than advocating for silence, I urge teachers to listen deeply to both talk and silence in their classrooms. (Conclusion: Listening to Silence Through Taking an Inquiry Stance section, para. 4)

This caution is understandable and to be respected, while the suspicion is both necessary and yet to be regretted.

While understanding and acknowledging the reasonableness of such a stance, I wish to recommend silence. Advocating for listening to silence is not enough. Silence is too powerful a presence and too rich a space to be held at arm’s length in the classroom. Unquestionably, silence and silencing hold risks and dangers, yet the potential rewards are great enough to make the risks worth it. I believe that we as teachers must take “leaps of faith” into silences as generative learning spaces and commit to promoting and cultivating inner and outer silences in our personal and pedagogical lives.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Margaret Macintyre Latta and Jessica Rivera for reading and critiquing earlier

drafts of this essay.

Notes

1. The original example is by Voloshinov, cited by Shotter, 2009, p. 23, who notes that his summary closely follows the original text.

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