

The Ethics of Student Classroom Silence

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Among the most frustrating classroom phenomena is that of students who will not or can not actively participate in classroom discussions. Student reticence, withdrawal, or fear of interacting not only deprives that student from sharing what they know, it deprives the teacher and classmates from benefiting by what a given student has to offer. This article makes the claim that student reticence has a vital ethical dimension to it and that there is an individual, teacher, classmate, and administrative obligation to reduce or eliminate such reticence for the benefit of all involved in the education arena. Participatory dialogue, according to Martin Buber, forecast "the future of mankind."¹

Student silence in class is not exclusively a problem for students who refuse to or are unable to respond to direct questions. The need for students to ask questions of clarification, exemplification, classification, validation, and curiosity; to be able and willing to provide examples that demonstrate that student's understanding and that will aid others in seeing examples not thought of by others; and to be able and willing to civilly challenge others' ideas and claims are paramount for optimum education to transpire in the classroom. Everyone in the classroom is responsible for pulling their own weight; all need to participate -- by discussing and by listening to others.

Why is an individual's silence deemed undesirable or detrimental? There are multiple responses to this question. One answer is that undo

student silence typically indicates any of the following symptoms: (1) apathy toward the topic at hand or to the learning process itself; (2) a student who is not comprehending, is overwhelmed, or is bored; (3) a

student who is self- or other isolated from the learning community; and/or (4) a student who has not learned the value of or strategies of engagement or who does not appreciate or believe in that value. Silent students deprive themselves and classmates from the benefit of their knowledge, their insights, and their thinking. Much learning stems from idea and perception sharing. Often, others' contributions stimulate more and better thinking and sharing from others; dialogue promotes a learning symbiosis. "Except in certain contexts, the meaning of any silence is inherently ambiguous and therefore subject to misinterpretation and misevaluation."² This highlights the need for careful and sensitive handling by teachers of student silences in the classroom.

The reticent student is less likely to apply, extend, or transfer what is learned than are non-reticent students. Application, extension, and transference are indirectly, but cogently, related to dialog since they require cooperation, risk taking, trust, acceptance, and tolerance with others as does dialog. The reticent student is typically self-absorbed and needs compassionate, but insistent, encouragement and enablement to participate.

There are several reasons why students are reticent to actively and equally participate in class discussion; these include: (1) low self esteem -- students who think of themselves as unworthy or unable tend to remain silent out of shame; (2) fear of being ridiculed should they inappropriately or inaccurately respond -- unfortunately, such fears can manifest themselves in self-fulfilling prophecies where a student knowingly answers or responds inappropriately thus validating their fears; (3) fear of success -- this occurs when a student interacts successfully; self-attributes their success to luck or accident; and then is intrepid about others expecting the student to continue to interact with similar or superior success in the future, coupled with doubts such future success can be produced; (4) cultural differences -- various cultures forbid or strongly discourage individuals from speaking up in

classroom settings; sometimes for reasons of deference out of respect for teachers' opinions, elder students' or higher status students' contributions, and/or gender/race/ethnicity related factors; (5) "to avoid conflict -- inexperienced, shy, or less competent communicators rely upon silence in avoiding conflict scenarios. Such avoidance should normally be easy to diagnose by alert teachers; and this strategy needs to be confronted delicately with alternative strategies offered as substitutes for unwanted silence."³ and (6) *communication apprehension* - a clinical fear of communicating with or in the presence of others. The term *communication apprehension* is widely studied and written about in Communication Studies literature. Over 250 articles in Communication discipline journals -- not including numerous books and conference papers -- have been written on the subject of communication apprehension.⁴

The vast majority of these many journal articles focus upon apprehension awareness, diagnoses, reduction, causes, and means of prevention by classroom teachers. None of the articles surveyed focused on the ethical dimension of reticence. The dominant ethical perspective employed in this essay comes from Richard L. Johannesen; it is called the **dialogic perspective**.⁵ Dialog exists when all communicative participants are allowed to, are encouraged to, and actually actively participate -- by speaking and listening to others -- in sharing ideas with each other. While it is not necessary to be dialogic or ethical to equally participate [quantitatively as well as qualitatively], it is imperative that all participants have a genuine and aware opportunity to do so. The attitudes held toward one's communication partners indicate cogently the sense of *community* present and needed for true dialog.⁶ If any participants' ideas are diminished, demonized, or ignored or their personhood is questioned or demeaned, unethicity is present. If one engages in communication with another, one implicitly agrees to respect and pay attention to the other and we can expect others to pay attention

to us when communicating. These lessons need to be taught to children in school in addition to how to communicate.

True dialog includes (1) *authenticity* -- being direct, honest, and straightforward; (2) *inclusion* -- to see the other, to see things from the other's perspective; (3) *confirmation* -- acknowledging, accepting, and valuing the other; (4) *presentness* -- give full attention to the other and to topics of dialog, avoiding distractions, giving of one's self to the other(s) and to the discussion, and taking the time and effort to be fully participative; (5) establish the *spirit of mutual equality* -- avoid class, race, or status differences; see others as equals; and (6) create a *supportive climate* -- avoid judgments, ad hominem statements, arguments, and aiding others in getting their ideas expressed.⁷ These, too, are skills, attitudes, and values that need teaching and validation at an early age.

Rhetorical ethicist, Jack Gibb suggests the need for the following characteristics in ethical dialog: cooperativeness, open mindedness, empathy, and objectivity.⁸ In order to fully develop ideas, integrate these ideas with others' thoughts, and to stimulate others to add to our thoughts, we need cooperation. An open mind includes waiting for ideas to be completely stated before assessing them. Empathy includes seeing matters in others' eyes, accepting others and their ideas, and avoiding personal desires/experiences obstructing our listening to others. Objectivity includes avoiding bias where possible and focusing on description over judgment.

Douglas Ehninger, Walter Fisher, Wayne Brockreide, and Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., all renown communication scholars posit the following characteristics of ethical dialog:⁹

1. "Ethical rhetoric serves the ends of self discovery, social knowledge, or public action more than personal ambition."
2. "Ethical rhetoric avoids intolerance and acknowledges audience freedom of choice and freedom of assent."

3. "Ethical rhetoric is reflexive in including self-scrutiny of one's own evidence, reasoning, and motives."
4. "Ethical rhetoric is bilateral. Bilaterality includes mutuality of personal and intellectual risk, openness to the possibility of self-change, and openness to scrutiny by others."
5. "Ethical rhetoric embodies an attitude of reasonableness. Reasonableness includes willingness to present reasons in support of our views, tolerance of presentation of reasons by others, respect for the intrinsic worth of the other person, and avoidance of personalizing [a] controversy."

Makay and Brown¹⁰ suggest the following characteristics as necessary for truly dialogic communication:

- (1) "Feedback -- feedback being defined as signals that communication has been understood and that it was worthy of reaction."
- (2) "An acceptance of disagreements with the desire to resolve them."
- (3) "Dealing with real issues and ones relevant to current dialog."
- (4) "A willingness to admit error and [to] allow persuasion."

These communication strategies and skills, too, need to be taught in the classroom to foster and encourage civil dialogic discourse. The distinction between feedback and rejection, snide comments, judgment, or disconfirmation needs to be taught. Appreciating conflict as healthy if resolution is sought by all parties also needs to be learned. Focusing on genuine and relevant issues is a skill learned by role modeling and by encouragement by mentors. Admitting to error and being amenable to persuasion are higher order skills which are valuable to dialog. These are not just the skills desired in the classroom; they are the basic building blocks of citizenship, politics, and commerce.

Some of the ways teachers, at any level, can help students learn to communicate dialogically and ethically are:

1. Offer a wide array of communication channels [ie: discussion, debate, analysis, brainstorming, group work, etc.

2. Initially create "no lose" situations for students. Construct options where each is a winner to instill confidence and foster a greater willingness to participate.
3. Be patient with reticent students. Do not rush them nor allow them to stall and thus have others called upon to fill the silence gap.
4. Apply, extend, paraphrase, and take note of reticent student offerings. Do not just accept their utterances unacknowledged or unused.
5. Encourage classmate celebration of others' contributions.
6. Foster a climate where students cite classmates' contributions thus validating their importance and utility in future class discussion or in student tests or writings.

Teachers are responsible for educating students in both content areas and in the skills arena as well. Dialogic communication is a skill that discussion, practice, role modeling, and mimicking can produce. Teachers need to be role models and cheerleaders for good communication behavior. School administrators are responsible for enabling, fostering, strengthening, and enforcing communication skills education in the curriculum and seeing to it that competent communication is, in fact, taught well. Students' parents and guardians ought to be morally responsible for monitoring, role modeling, validating, and encouraging ethical and improved dialogic communication.

"In the exercise of power, silence is used to influence others and to resist influence....Students use silence in the classroom to resist teachers' control....[Silence is employed] as a means of social control, silence is used to protest, to censure, to regulate, and to resist."¹¹

Our students are our culture's future leaders, producers, and parent of the following generation. As such, it is imperative that we teach them the skills needed to be ethical and dialogic. The classroom is not the only venue for such education; however, it is the place where more young people congregate for the purpose of learning. We teachers owe our students the best learning available to them.

Notes

- ¹ Glatzer, Nahum Norbert. (Ed.). (1966). *The Way of Response: Martin Buber*. New York: Schocken Books, p. 109.
- ² Saville-Troike, Muriel. (1985). The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication. In Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (Eds.). *Perceptions On Silence*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. Cited in Ray Anderson and Deborah Bart. (1990). *When Silence Speaks: Reflections on the Ethics of Silence*.
- ³ Verderber, Kathleen S. and Rudolph F. Verderber. (1986). *Interact: Using Interpersonal Communication Skills*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. Cited in Ray Anderson and Deborah Bart. (1990). *When Silence Speaks: Reflections on the Ethics of Silence*.
- ⁴ Matlon, Ronald J. and Sylvia P. Ortiz (Eds.). (1997). *Index to Journals in Communication Studies Through 1995*, p. 674. *National Communication Association*.
- ⁵ Johannesen, Richard L. (1996). *Ethics in Human Communication*, 4th ed. [chapter 4]. Waveland Press.
- ⁶ Johannesen, p. 64.
- ⁷ Johannesen, pp. 67-68.
- ⁸ Gibb, Jack. (1961). Defensive Communication. *Journal of Communication*, 11 (3): 141-148.
- ⁹ Johannesen, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁰ Mackay, John J. and William R. Brown. (1972). *The Rhetorical Dialog*. Dubuque, IA: Wlm. C. Brown, p. 27.
- ¹¹ Gilmore, Gary. (1985). Silence and Sulking: Emotional Displays in the Classroom. In Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (Eds.). *Perceptions on Silence*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. Cited in Ray Anderson and Deborah Bart. (1990). *When Silence Speaks: Reflections on the Ethics of Silence*.