

# Silence in Progressive Teaching

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**Periods of silence in the classroom can help students really listen to what they are studying and what they are saying about it.**

The issues facing us on all fronts are nearly apocalyptic in scope: ecological destruction, sectarian violence, economic injustice, and oppression related to gender, ethnicity, class, religion, age, disability, and sexual orientation. With these realities in mind, Richard E. Miller (2001, Cover 4) asks:

What do the humanities have to offer in the twenty-first century? Are there compelling reasons to go on teaching the literate arts when the schools themselves have become battlefields? Does it make sense to go on writing when the world itself is overrun with books that no one reads?

Many progressive teachers and scholars, perhaps particularly younger ones, including myself, would fervently answer: *yes, of course!* In fact, the theme of a conference on politics, poetry, and pedagogy that I recently took part in would do as a response to Miller: *Anything but Silence*. Indeed, if we look, say, at Edvard Munch's famous painting *The Scream* and consider that things aren't all that much better now than they were a hundred years ago when he painted it, we might conclude that even *screaming* is a sane enough reaction to the mess the world is in.

Writing, speaking, and teaching in resistance to the things that are wrong with the world are bold and essential tasks. Scholars and teachers have long resisted injustice through breaking the silence on oppressive systems and ideologies. On the whole, we have much to show for our work. In addition to critical perspectives on class, race, and gender, we have ecocriticism, postcolonial studies, disability studies, to name only a few. However, sadly, these movements have not in themselves ended the problems they address. They have not in themselves, say, fully given voice to the voiceless.

So Miller's questions are worth lingering with, without rushing to answer. "Does it make sense to go



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on writing ... " and speaking and teaching? Miller's (2001, 136) own working answer is to look for balanced, sustainable ways of teaching. He suggests a "pragmatic pedagogy" "grounded" among other things in "compromise." Such an approach may not vibrate with as much energy as a call for "anything but silence" but will probably prove to be more effective in the long run. So in line with Miller, I want to suggest that we do indeed need to continue to write, speak, and teach but that we also ought to consider spending some time being silent. I want to suggest, paradoxically, that we can help those without a voice to come to voice and come to voice ourselves better through a proper use of silence than with no silence at all.

Facebook, for instance, offers the world all speech and no silence. Last year the social networking site boasted that it had more than 500 million active users, that the average user had 130 "friends," and that there were more than 60 million status updates posted each day. Facebook has accomplished something absolutely unprecedented in terms of providing people, including many who are oppressed and silenced, with platforms for public speech. But this wonderful, unimaginable wash of language from all corners of the world has not produced parallel achievements in justice or authentic voice. Most things that are said on Facebook are trivial and worthless. Many things that are said there are even harmful. This is not to denigrate the important role that Facebook has played in recent uprisings in the Middle East. Though the networking site certainly *can* and sometimes *does* facilitate meaningful interactions for those who use it for such purposes, on the whole, wisdom put into words in such an environment drowns in the din.

Our schools and universities also inundate people with language. Of course, academic language generally operates at a much higher level than Facebook. Instead of status updates, invites, comments, and pokes, we have classes, books, articles, and conferences. The "Anything but Silence" conference alone was awash in words. In 2004 the *Library Journal* reported that there are just under 50,000 scholarly journals. In all, this amounts to millions of peer-reviewed articles and thousands of millions of words. But the rub is that these words may or may not have a posi-

tive impact. These words may or may not increase justice and compassion in the world. These words may speak what needs to be heard — or they may drown it out. So even though we must continue to dialogue, we have to be careful not to talk ourselves into the idea that we can talk justice and peace into the world.

More and louder language does not necessarily mean deeper connectedness among people or greater voice for the oppressed. As Toni Morrison (1993) points out so nicely in her Nobel Prize lecture, language does not inevitably lead to goodness, truth, justice, and freedom. All words become noise when there are too many of them in too small a space of time. We are submersed in such noise almost all of the time. This noise does not make us freer, more whole. Noise complies with *silencing* more than silence does.

Noise works to drown out the authentic speech that could otherwise come out of silence. In fact, the silencing of those without voices is usually a noisy process. This is most obvious when advertising and the other sounds of consumer society drown out voices that desperately need to be heard and when guns, billy clubs, and tear gas are used to silence protesters. But, more subtly, education can also become part of the noise of society. Without room for silence, the language in our classrooms risks being reduced to just so much more noise in our and our students' already cacophonous lives.

None of what I am saying is intended to negate the importance of what has been accomplished through language or what we do with language on a regular basis. Instead, I want to suggest some ways of moving forward through language *and* silence.

There is a kind of silence absolutely different from the *silencing* of the oppressed. This is the silence practiced by poets, political activists, spiritual seekers, and contemplative pedagogues, like David Kahane (2009), Henri Nouwen (1991), and Parker Palmer (1993). Gandhi wrote and spoke prolifically. One of the most effective political activists of all time, he accomplished significant strides for justice in India. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* is one hundred volumes long, over 50,000 pages. But Gandhi's strength and effectiveness came not only from his words but also from his silence. Every week, he

spent a whole day in silence. I'm suggesting that we too could integrate something of this kind of silence into our writing and into our classrooms.

When our words fail to bring peace and justice to the silenced, silence can permit us to join them at a deeper level; silence can allow all of us to be changed and to come to voice more freely, more authentically, and more effectively. Silence can punctuate what has been said, allow us space to absorb it, and allow us to move beyond it. Silence can welcome the silenced to speak. Silence can help us realize the limits and proper uses of language. Silence can cut through the constructs that we are fed and that we feed ourselves. Silence can take us out of the "prison-house of language." As Albert Nolan (1985) suggests, silence can help us through the necessary disillusionment with language that is part of the process of maturing as persons and as scholars, educators, or activists. Speech that comes out of the depth of silence comes out *with* the depth of silence. As the spiritual writer Henri Nouwen (1991, 49-50) says, "Words can ... create communion and ... new life when they embody the silence from which they emerge." Many of the most poignant forms of language — the parable, the haiku, the sayings of wise women and men — are words that have "emerged from silence" and "return to it."

Most of us are addicted to noise. Even one minute of silence in a classroom or at a conference can produce palpable discomfort because we aren't used to silence. But we can grow out of this addiction.

### Three Ways of Integrating Silence

I want to suggest three ways for us to integrate silence into our work and lives as scholars and teachers. I have put each of these into practice and found each sustaining for myself and my teaching, particularly in those instances where too much injustice can lead to despair, too much work to burnout, or too many words to numbness.

First, we can adopt silence as an *epistemological value*. This simply has to do with remembering the limits of language, the limits that literary and cultural theorists have already helped us to realize.

Second, we can incorporate silence into our scholarship as a *personal academic practice*. We can work moments of silence into our reading and writing pro-

cesses. So often the academic norm is to aggressively probe the object of study. But if this characterizes our whole relationship with a text or artifact or set of data or group of people — whatever we are studying, then we run the risk of doing all of the talking, ignoring what the text or artifact or data or people might be able to say to us. By taking moments of silence, we can learn to really listen to what we are studying and really listen to what we are saying about it.

Third, we can incorporate silence into our teaching as a *classroom practice*. We can work moments of silence into our lectures and discussions. The most practical instance is to wait after asking a question to give our students time to think and respond, as opposed to answering the question ourselves only seconds after we ask it. If teachers become comfortable in these silences, students can feel comfortable and feel welcomed to participate. We could also offer short periods of silence, say a minute, or even thirty seconds, after looking at some text or specimen or case study, before beginning to speak about it. The academic norm in the classroom is to fit into the allotted time as much content as possible, but by taking time for silence, we can teach our students to really listen to what they are studying and really listen to what they are saying about it.

### A Classroom Reading Activity

To illustrate this last point, I end this essay by presenting a version of a classroom activity that I often do in my literature courses. The final scene of James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" takes place in a jazz bar in Harlem. The band is playing. In part, the story is about music, an art form that occupies space between language and silence. For the story to mean anything for us, for it to have any impact, for it to do something for justice, voice, compassion, and even love, for it to do what it was written to do, for it to take part in what we work towards, we must first hear it, *really hear it*. Silence can help us listen.

In the classroom the activity proceeds like this: I read a selected passage out loud several times. Between readings I pause generously in silence. Sometimes I ask students to point out particular words or phrases that stand out to them or to share brief personal or aesthetic responses. The silence creates

space for the language, and the language frames the silence. I invite readers to take time to re-create this activity for themselves by reading aloud the following passage from Baldwin's story (1965, 103-141).

The first reading:

Then Creole [on the saxophone] stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.... [Sonny was playing the piano.] It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, and what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did.

Now, a moment of silence, followed by the second reading:

For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard.... It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried.... Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did.

Again, a moment of silence, followed by the third reading:

[W]e suffer ... we are delighted ... we may triumph ... it must be heard ... beautiful ... it wasn't hurried ... listen ... be free ....

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