

The Silent Teacher: A Performative, Meditative Model of Pedagogy

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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.

—Paul T. Corrigan, “Silence in Progressive Teaching”

Like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function.

—Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*

1. Conversations about Meditation

In a recent article by Ruth Henderson, “The Forgiveness Classroom: Bringing Together Students From Both Sides of the Walls through Deep Listening,” there is a focus on the extraordinary power of silence and listening. This teacher articulates her teaching as a “sacred experience” (49), where the more time she dedicates to listening to her students, the more they learn. In Henderson’s approach, silent meditation sessions are brought directly into the classroom space, where students use this practice as a way of “listening for the spiritually transcendent” as well as harnessing its strength as a “conflict resolution tool” (54). In the context of Henderson’s forgiveness course, offering meditation is a crucial strategy, as her project is to guide both college students and prison inmates toward facing and disarming very dark parts of themselves—the shady corners that are not willing to listen to others, not willing to empathize with others, and even the parts that want to use physical violence.

As a Buddhist as well as a Reiki practitioner (a healing art which has its roots in Buddhism), I meditate on a daily basis. In addition, about once a month, I spend a full day in silence. And, yet, despite my profound love of silence, I have not yet incorpo-

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rated meditation into the college writing courses I teach. There is more thinking that needs to be done. I have hesitations: What kind of academic goals could I (or should I?) attach to the practice of meditation? Would my bringing meditation into the classroom perhaps be interpreted as a kind of colonizing act—would students view this as an intrusive indoctrination or pushy advertisement for Eastern spiritual paths, and would that then cause other unnecessary tensions in the classroom? Would it be difficult to make the transition from the meditation space (where thinking is dismissed in favor of concentration on the breath) back to the analytical thinking/writing/speaking space, all in a single class period?

I have many questions. And I can imagine other teachers might have many questions, too, when presented with the notion that meditation may have a rightful place within the classroom. In light of these concerns, I offer an alternative model of pedagogy, one where another version of silence can serve to empower students. I offer it in the same vein that Henderson offered hers, “not as a model to replicate” but rather “as an essay designed to stimulate reflection” (49). Similar to English professor George Kalamaras, I offer my pedagogy to those who are currently, for whatever reasons, “wary of actual meditation in class”; I offer my experience as an outline for focusing on how “values that come from the practice of meditation—such as trust in intuition, ambiguity, and chaos” can “shape theories of composing, pedagogy, and curricular reform” (23). Like Kalamaras, I see traditional meditation in the classroom as something that might not work for everyone. What is wonderful, however, is that silence is *not* an all-or-nothing proposition.

Specifically, this essay considers how performance theory may evolve our pedagogy through silence. Starting with a brief taxonomy of silence and then exploring these concepts through qualitative methods, I advocate for two empowering course activities that actively embrace the purposeful silence of the teacher: the “Open Seminar” and the “Peer-for-Peer Conferences.” While analysis stems from my experience as a writing teacher, this performative, meditative approach is well suited to courses in the humanities, where texts and art are interpreted.

2. The Silent Teacher

2.1 Traditions and Disciplines

Western culture often views silence as something to avoid. Silence is supposedly problematic, something that should be broken quickly. Silence must mean that students are being shy, ignorant, or rebellious; silence must mean that someone or some group is being oppressed. It is not surprising that a recent academic conference on poetry, politics, and pedagogy took as its title *Anything but Silence*, a conference that advocated the continuation—rather than the silencing—of the humanities in the twenty-first century (Corrigan 8). Often, teachers write about strategies for helping students overcome silence in writing and in speech: in pedagogical articles, students

clinging to silence are often portrayed as those who have a “fear of failure or ridicule” or feel angry, ashamed, or some other negative emotion (Fredericksen 116–120).

But there are other ways to think about silence. Feminist rhetorician Cheryl Glenn sees silence as a hopeful term. In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (2004), she calls for “silence as a rhetoric,” saying that: “[S]ilence is too often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on expressive power. Employed as a tactical strategy...silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use” (xi). Her project is to illuminate the possibilities of silence and to argue against its current status as an “under-valued and under-understood” art in rhetoric (2). Although Glenn’s work does not focus on the pedagogical uses of silence, she does make a compelling case for silence as a rhetorical strategy, one being as equally important as language.

Within the field of writing studies, the idea that the teacher should limit the amount she speaks—that she should actively aim for times of strategic silence—is not new. This is what the “process” movement in the 1960’s–1980’s was about. Writing teachers increasingly valued classroom peer review as well as increased student-lead discussion and activity in the classroom. No longer was the teacher center stage, talking endlessly.

Since then, and especially in the past decade, there have been amplifications in both cultural/historical theory and pedagogical theory regarding reversals of negative, traditionally Western views of silence. More and more, silence is being re-visioned to mean a strategy for revitalized education, as well as active citizenship. Frank Farmer’s *Saying and Silence: Listening to Composition with Bakhtin* outlines a variety of ways in which “silences” that occur within and between student texts “can be named and understood” (8). Other scholars within rhetoric and writing studies such as Mary M. Reda, Krista Ratcliffe, Pat Belanoff, James Moffett, Anne Gere, Peter Elbow, and Charles Suhor, as well as others from the field of education such as Kate Chanock, Huey-li Li, and Ros Ollin (who first coined the term “silent pedagogy”) have insisted that silence can no longer be seen as just that which oppresses, distorts, harms, restricts, or hides—rather, silence is itself a rhetorical art and act. Silence can be purposeful. Powerful. Along with Glenn, I believe that silence and language should be seen as reciprocal, rather than as opposites, and that silence can be harnessed as a hopeful device, which has the potential to, among other effects, “deploy power” (xi). Where my work diverges from others I mention is in the longer, dramatic nature of silence—teacher silence is often deployed for whole class periods, and is used as a type of meditational gateway.

When teachers adopt their own silence in a qualified manner—that is, they use it with a context-specific goal or aim—students are given the choice to *build the potential power of the classroom*. For, as we know, a classroom does not necessarily have power by simply being there. Showing up is not enough. A group of students plus a teacher

does not mean there is power¹ present. Twentieth century political theorist Hannah Arendt, a scholar whose thinking is being revived by performance studies theorists, literary scholars and feminist scholars such as Judith Butler, discusses how transformative power can be made. Arendt writes that power is actually “only potentially” there when “people gather together”; but “not necessarily” and “not forever” (199). She writes: “power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization. Where power is not actualized, it passes away...Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity” (200). In effect, Arendt helps teachers imagine the classroom as a site for powerful learning, *potentially*. Gathering in the space is the first step, yes, but this is not a guarantee that anything will happen. The performance of silence can be deployed, then, as a strategy for provoking a *something more* to happen.

While this essay focuses on the performative silence of teachers, I encourage readers to consider how a pedagogy of silence might be broadened to welcome strategies, moments, and possibilities for student silence as well. In the present study, students’ silence naturally happens, especially during the Open Seminar; however, it is not something that I have yet adequately theorized. It is my hope that readers will leave this essay asking about ways to promote active, powerful student silence².

2.2 *Silence as Performance: Discomfort, Plurality, Unpredictability*

The influential twentieth-century sociologist Erving Goffman, a figure who has been important for performance studies, defines *performance* as “the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (63). In this sense, then, the silence you make as you lie in bed is not performance. When you are standing in the shower, alone: that is not performance. Neither is the silence of taking a solitary stroll through the park. Silence is a performance only when someone is watching. Your silence stops being mundane, becomes meaningful, when there are eyes on you.

In some sense, too, performance does not feel completely natural. There is a bit of work to it. There may even be a measure of discomfort, sometimes quite large, in performing actions in front of, and in hopes of influencing, others. Part of this discomfort may stem from the fact that we can never know, in advance, the outcome of our performance. We can never know if our performance will be well-received by our audience. And, since performance often means very difficult work, we can tend to

¹ When I write of “power” in this context, I do not mean to invoke any complex Foucauldian meanings: When I say power here I really just mean, simply, the “strength” of an environment for its purpose of learning.

² A good source to consult on this topic is Mary M. Reda’s *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students* (2009), which challenges the idea that not speaking means not knowing; she presents student silence as one of the modes of productive learning.

second-guess ourselves before or during the performance. We can feel crippled by anxiety and wonder if we should quit.

When the classroom is a performative space—thus, an unpredictable space—*one cannot predict what one will learn*. Of course—hopefully!—one will learn about the topic at hand. If one enters a Marxist Theory course and comes out with not a drop of understanding about Marxist Theory, then that class has failed (probably). However, a teacher must risk the classroom as a space where not only Marxist Theory can be learned, but other lessons, too. A classroom with crackling energy—a classroom with the greatest transformative potential—is the classroom that offers a plurality of learning; besides the main topic at hand, potential lessons may be material, spiritual, emotional, cultural, practical, communal, personal, or may be a combination of these. Those lessons will often be equally as valuable for a student’s overall development as theories of Marxism. Indeed, this essay is grounded in the idea that a plurality of learning must be an essential pedagogical base from which to embrace and construct a performative, meditative space for teacher silence.

It must be noted, too, that a plurality of learning is very much dependent upon how a teacher constructs her learning space. When the classroom is a space of placid routine, it is not hard to imagine students’ engagement at placid states. Conversely, when pedagogy holds room for some unpredictability—for some unscripted moments—students have the chance for some heightened engagement. They are prompted to take greater ownership of the classroom space through reflection; they ask themselves, silently: “What is happening here? How can I change what is happening? What is my role? What is not my role? How should I contribute, risk, react, or initiate? How can I support my classmates? How can I support myself? What are my goals for the present moment, for the future?” Carving out a space for unpredictability is the task of any teacher who wants to create a plurality of learning. In “Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching,” writing teacher Pat Belanoff explains how silence and unpredictability interrelate, thus causing “thoughtfulness,” which is the optimal learning condition:

Thoughtfulness...requires certain conditions that are very difficult to achieve in schools. For instance, in order for people to be thoughtful you need a certain amount of mystery. Paradox is helpful. Uncertainty often stimulates us to think. Ambiguity can be a good condition for stimulating thoughtfulness, as is unpredictability, an atmosphere in which there are multiple demands, a dynamic social environment. Also needed are a good deal of diversity in culture and language and background; theoretical disagreements; tension; incongruity; incompleteness; an urgent need to know; wonder; marvel; astonishment; surprise; enchantment. (418)

Perhaps most critical in Belanoff’s quotation are her final five words. No doubt when a teacher can create a classroom that provokes wonder, marvel, astonishment, surprise, and enchantment, these powerful emotions can lead to powerful student reflectivity about the academic subject matter.

It is a ripe moment for continuing the revision of what it means to “teach” a class. Indeed, since the libratory pedagogies of the 1960’s and 1970’s, teachers have

been transforming the long teacher-centered history of the classroom. Across disciplines, teachers have rejected the notion that students enter the classroom as blank slates to be filled with lectures and facts. More and more, what teachers ask for, as we enter settle into the twenty-first century, is a classroom space that requires more engaging performances for *both student and teacher*. As a result of these changes in thinking, the language of the theatre and the language of performance studies are being used to theorize education. In “Performing/Teaching/Writing: Performance Studies in the Composition Classroom,” Ryan Claycomb describes this current historical moment as one where rhetoric and composition studies are “perched on the outset of a thoughtful, complicated and thorough exploration of what we might find at this...intersection of performing, teaching, and writing” (9). Moreover, I am convinced that the time is ripe not just for the composition classroom, but classrooms across disciplines and across campuses because the inclusion of thinking from performance studies has indeed become mainstream within a broad range of scholarship. Consider that in 2005, The American Society for Theatre Research and the Theatre Library Association Annual Conference focused their theme on the idea that “performance” has become a widely-accepted critical term, one which has “migrat[ed] throughout the humanities and social sciences” (Claycomb 1). Anthropologist Clifford Geertz summarizes the situation succinctly:

The drama analogy for social life has of course been around in a casual sort of way—all the world’s a stage and we but poor players who strut and so on—for a very long time. And terms from the stage, most notably “role,” have been staples of sociological discourse since at least the 1930s. What is relatively new—new, not unprecedented— [is that] the full weight of the analogy is coming to be applied extensively and systematically, rather than begin deployed piecemeal fashion—a few allusions here, a few tropes there. (66)

Geertz also discusses—and I agree—how it is not necessarily revolutionary to think about the classroom as theater, as the teacher as actor, or of students as audience. These ideas have been long circulating. What *would be* revolutionary, however, would be shifting the meaning of these tropes. What if we flipped the script? What if we enacted new performances—and through those performances (of teacher silence), we gave up our still-glorified³ spot on stage, and asked our students to *join us* on that stage? What if we, in so doing, gave our students something they don’t expect—something that they don’t even know they need? Erving Goffman defines the goal of the performer in a performance is to “sustain a definition of the situation” (87). If we follow this definition, we will see, then, that taking up strategic silences will initiate the *opposite* of what many students always already expect from a classroom situation—which is still, unfortunately, mere passivity. Performative teacher silences will begin to

³ Despite the radical updates in pedagogical theory over the past half century, I do believe that teachers still, for the most part, occupy a glorified position within a very-much hierarchical classroom.

create a *new definition* of the classroom, of what it means to teach and to be taught. When students choose to become the performers via speech (as well as listening, but more on that later) while teachers simultaneously become the performers of silence, students act as fuller agents in their learning-making. Of course, the teacher may still perform some solitary leadership duties: such as make the syllabus, assign grades, create projects and assignments, and shape the general arc of the term. No one should deny that the teacher should be a major actor in the educational experience. Yet, the questions must be asked: How can students be made to feel the weight of performance, too (aside from just performing in order to earn certain grades)? How can teachers provide the moments, the possibilities for a plural learning, which involves unpredictability and emotion?

2.3 Terminology

Later in this essay I will describe two classroom events⁴ that allow teachers to harness the generative, creative, powerful tool of *performed silence*. What do I mean by performed silence? First, let me tell you what I *don't* mean. A performed silence is not 1) when a teacher uses silence to punish students, 2) when a teacher uses silence to mock or belittle students, 3) when a teacher utilizes silence to shirk her professional responsibility, 4) when a teacher uses silence in ways that magnify her power over students, and/or 5) when a teacher is temporarily unable or unwilling to speak due to shock, confusion, or some overwhelming emotion. Those situations are all examples that should not be confused with performed silence.

Here is what I *do* mean when I use the term. Performed silence relates to the kind of classroom where a teacher realizes what silence can do for learning. My definition is this: A performed silence is when the teacher regularly and strategically adopts silence within the classroom in the service of transformative learning. In other words, silence happens regularly, in well-articulated, thoroughly rationalized ways.

A performance of silence is a lack of words that make things happen.

In the pedagogical approach I'm proposing, teachers embrace silence rather than shunning it. They harness silence for its power to build community. Many Eastern cultures have a long history of respect for silence as a tool, a communal craft. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, states in plain terms the importance of silence in Buddhist societies, where spending silent time in temples and monasteries—places virtually void of all verbal communication—are still a mandatory part of citizen-training.

In Thailand and other Buddhist countries, in the old times young men were supposed to spend one year in a temple [in silence] to receive spiritual training. They had mandatory spiritual service instead of military service. Even the prince had to spend one year in a monastery before becoming king. This was a beautiful

⁴ I often refer to these as “events” rather than activities in order to connote their dramatic nature.

thing! But now the time has been reduced to a month or a few weeks, which is not long enough. (164–165)

Despite the fact that these retreats are becoming shorter, the notion of mandatory silence seems wonderful and amazing to me! To imagine that a government would ask its people to spend time disengaged from everyday productivity (the market, career and family obligations, etc.) and, instead, take the time to learn from silent contemplation seems difficult to imagine as a practice that could happen in the West.

Nevertheless, the classroom remains a hopeful, open place for the potential power of silence. Before explaining two classroom events and providing student commentary about them, allow me to first provide a brief taxonomy of teacher silence. Of course, the contents of this list might be met with some recognition: for it is quite likely that many teachers have already implemented some of these silences without explicitly linking them together or thinking about how they fit into an overall pedagogical approach that focuses on silence.

In considering this taxonomy, it is important to remember that performed silences must be integrated into a holistic approach that takes care to avoid negative effects on students. Performed silences are silences that do *not* stand alone, but are followed-up, bolstered, or supported in various critical, reflective ways. Performed silences are performed by a teacher with a plan—and this plan must be at once fluid and flexible. In other words, teachers who adopt silences are always aware of the inherent dangers; they do well to contemplate the advice of educational theorist Parker Palmer:

In most places where people meet, silence is a threatening experience. It makes us self-conscious and awkward; it feels like some kind of failure. So the teacher who uses silence must understand that a silent space seems inhospitable at first to people who measure progress by noise. Silence must be introduced cautiously; we must allow ourselves to be slowly re-formed in its discipline before it can become an effective teaching tool. But once the use of silence is established with a group, once we learn that we make progress in being quiet...silence becomes a potent space for learning. (81)

The following taxonomy, as it relates to the intersection between performance and pedagogy⁵, is classified by categories of examples of productive moments where incorporating teacher silence may make the most sense as well descriptions of *exactly how* these silences may take place. Of course, due to length limitations, I cannot hope

⁵ Several communication scholars have offered taxonomies of the meanings and interpretations of silence in a more general sense. One such excellent taxonomy is by Richard L. Johannesen, which Glenn discusses/reprints in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (16). Also, Ros Ollin provides a wonderful table that provides “examples of observing different uses of silence in the classroom” (277). Her table lists examples of various silences, such as “meta-silence,” “visual-verbal,” or “interactional” silence; however, she does not provide an in-depth explanation of how teachers might go about performing each of these types of silence.

to cover or predict all such potential moments; rather, please consider this a preliminary sketch, hopefully resulting in continued conversations that will build an even richer, and even more expanded taxonomy.

2.4 *A Taxonomy of Teacher Silence*

To begin or end a class session:

- *Start or end with silence.* Some of my favorite high school, undergraduate, and graduate instructors began or ended class periods with a time of silence. Some of these teachers asked for private, silent writing time, and other asked for no action or bodily movement at all—simply to sit in quiet, meditative contemplation. Parker Palmer writes about how he often begins class sessions with a bit of silence: “It may last only a few minutes, but it gives us a chance to settle in and center down, to move a bit beyond the truth-evading distractions of our minds and emotions. I do not call this practice “prayer,” but that is what it is—a time when we can still ourselves enough to begin to feel our natural connectedness to each other and the world” (80). Crucial to this process is that the teacher must genuinely reflect along with her students, thus creating a moment of active silent communion, where all are involved. If the teacher is not participating, the students may feel that the request to silently reflect is an unrealistic (or even hostile) request—and, due to this interpretation, will choose not to participate.
- *Withhold reminder or summary.* Here, the teacher withholds a summary of the previous class meeting, and asks for a student volunteer to provide a recollection of what was learned in the last class(es). Additionally, the teacher will avoid the urge to call on a particular student. Rather, a meditative silence (where students can have the space to silently gather their thoughts; this may take a few minutes) prevails until one brave student volunteers to speak, or share in some way, the requested summary.

In response to student questions:

- *Say “I don’t know.”* Sometimes, the teacher genuinely does not know the answer to a student’s question. Rather than guess or pretend to know, the teacher honestly and humbly admits that the question is a tough one, and that she does not yet know a good enough answer; the teacher says “I don’t know,” and then leaves it at that. Thus, the students begin to understand that the teacher is not the sole source for meaning-making. The teacher’s performance of not-answering thus re-directs the weight of the question back at the students. At this time, the students are faced with a choice. They can dismiss the question, they can attempt an answer right then, or they can reflect upon it later—

through further (out-of-class) research, through dialogue with their peers, and through other ways of investigation. This is probably the boldest kind of performed silence a teacher can make, as the teacher never answers the question for the students. (This move would not be appropriate in all situations.) A teacher who performs this silence will remember that the ancient Greek meaning of “educate” is “to draw out.” Thus, it is a teacher’s job to draw out what the student already knows; to “evoke the truth the student holds within” (Palmer 43).

- *Say “thank you.”* After a student question, the teacher simply smiles and says “thank you” or “thank you for asking that” and then allows some moments for silence. I have used this tactic in response to intelligent, articulately-stated questions. This tactic allows for the questioner as well as the other students to reflect upon the question itself—for, in this situation, the way the question is worded holds a kind of answer. After a period of silence, the teacher may or may not answer the question.
- *Respond to a question with a question.* A teacher responds to a question with another question aimed at either the questioner or the whole group. For example, a student may ask, “If there are multiple ways to cite a source in APA format, what do I do?” In understanding that the student is feeling anxious about the “correct” way to use APA (and is probably worried about getting points taken off or a lowered grade for improper usage), it would be helpful to engage the class in a general discussion about why APA or any format is used in the first place; this discussion will probably help to dissolve the tension that that student is feeling. So, the teacher would respond to that student by saying, “Great question. I think that to get to the root of your question, we need to ask another question: What is the purpose of using a formatting system at all?” As students discuss, the questioner will realize that formatting is not created in order to purposely confuse or “trip up” that student—rather, the writer utilizes a given formatting system with a good faith effort (and it doesn’t always have to be “perfect”), to simply help her readers most easily find those discussed sources if they want to research the topic further.
- *Respond by specific redirection.* A teacher responds to a question by directing a student to ask a specific classmate that same question, right then, with the whole class acting as audience to the conversation. The decision of which student the questioner should ask would be based on a teacher’s prior knowledge (acquired through reading the students’ writing or through conversation or other means) regarding which student would be the most able or willing to attempt answering the question. In this way, the teacher has performed a kind of skillful bridge-making. She has helped to create a sense of community because the student toward whom the question is re-directed now feels crucial to the exploration of the whole class, and is also challenged to perform. There are multiple benefits here. Ultimately, however, students should not feel coerced to speak. Not answering the question is always a fine option.

- *Perform a kind smile.* The teacher simply smiles with kindness. Once, my student asked me during a class meeting, “Why the heck should I be in college, anyway?” I did not attempt to answer that question. How *could I* answer that question for her? Rather, I smiled as a way to show my appreciation of her willingness to raise the question, a question that I felt other students must also be interested in. I allowed for a long silence, and then made warm eye contact with her to assure her that her question was welcome. And I bit my tongue (even though doing so was a very uncomfortable performance); what I really wanted to say was “Well, you are in college so that you can acquire the critical abilities to... (and so forth).” This was not a question for the teacher to answer; rather, a question for the questioner herself. Teacher-scholar Donald L. Finkel, in *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (2000), argues that while teaching through telling is a natural, understandable temptation for teachers, we should—more often—keep our mouths shut in order to best teach. He argues that some of the best teachers teach through the difficult art of stepping back, through “teaching with their mouth shut.” He urges teachers across disciplines to actively resist conforming to this cultural image of what it means to be a “Great Teacher”:

She was enthusiastic about her subject. She seemed to know everything there was to know about it, and then some. She had an awe-inspiring command over her material, and in response to any question, could hold forth brilliantly for as long as she wished. She was captivating when she spoke. She made her field come alive. She got excited in explaining it, and her excitement was contagious. She was clear in her expositions. She asked probing questions and followed them with illuminating answers. When her lectures were over, her students left the classroom touched by what she had said. They wished that they, too, could master this subject, or some subject. Their minds felt alive, and their souls felt virtuous. They wanted to be like their teacher. They resolved to attack their books with fresh vigor, although at the back of their minds, they realized they would never be able to achieve the godlike heights she had achieved, even if they were to work at it their whole lives. (5)

Even though it is tempting, we need to avoid being like this Great Teacher: the one who speaks all, tells all—in every situation. In a scenario such as this, we should resist telling the student what she needs to tell herself. Instead, we can simply smile kindly, and allow for a moment of meditative silence. Also, too, sometimes smiles may not always be appropriate—what may be appropriate instead is the conveyance (in whatever means necessary) of a compassionate presence: a teacher is who fully *there* with the student.

- *Direct the question to be written.* When a student question has energy, complexity, or some sense of intrigue, the teacher may first respond to that question with silence and a nod, and then direct the whole class to write that question. Sometimes the act of silent writing and then silent looking (at that question) is a powerful, provocative act—more powerful than a teacher’s answer.

- *Ask a student to take a silent moment to re-think/re-phrase the question.* When an inarticulate question is asked, the teacher can gently urge that student to rephrase the question. In this case, the teacher maintains silence in response to the question as a way to encourage students to choose their words and sentences more reflectively. Along these lines, a teacher may ask a student to rephrase a half-baked student question into a more rich, full question (a full sentence). Performance studies theorist Anne Bogart urges teachers to train their students in clear, precise speech. In her recent book, *And Then, You Act: Making Art in an Unpredictable World*, she writes, “One of the most radical things you can do in this culture of the inexact is to finish a sentence. Notice what a vibrant act in the world this can be. Feel the power of finishing a sentence. And yet, it is difficult to finish a sentence. Words conspire against it. Listen to people speaking around you. Inarticulate people are not dangerous to any political or societal systems” (17). Indeed, if one of our goals is to educate our students to think radically, often against oppressive political or societal systems, then it is one of a teacher’s many duties to prompt students to speak with confidence and precision. (Another tactic in this vein might be to begin a sentence and then ask students to finish it.) Again, though, it must be stated that in a classroom which values silence, the option to not speak is always given to the student. Students should not be shamed from admitting that they, too, “don’t know.”

Staying silent during student interpretation:

- *Allow for diverse image interpretation.* Images, free from the use of any voice or text, can be offered to students. Students will view images—perhaps on the board, on a screen, or printed in a book—and then silently ponder their meaning or significance.
- *Allow for freer exploration of texts.* A teacher will arrange study groups (that either meet during class or out-of-class) where students will wrestle together with what texts mean. The teacher will stay silent, not providing any answers. If asked, the teacher might provide clues, or might remain totally silent. In this way, students feel freer to voice their own interpretations. They have less fear that they will “get it wrong” simply because they do not know the teacher’s view; thus, they do not feel the need to compare themselves to the teacher.
- *Allow for freer artistic interpretation.* A teacher will ask students to attend an artistic event (such as the theatre, a film, the ballet, etc.), or read a poem, parable, or short story. The teacher asks students to share their interpretations during class. According to Finkel, to explain a piece of art is like “robbing students of their struggle” (15). To struggle, to wrestle, is a moment of learning. Again, as in the previous bullet, to give a final stamp of interpretation is the quickest way to kill any chance for true learning, for provoking the students to meet the material on their own terms because they will be too busy comparing themselves to what they believe is the “correct” interpretation given by the teacher.

Becoming “strategically naïve”:

- *Not revealing your full identity.* Composition teacher-scholar Julie Lindquist urges teachers to become actors, to “become strategically naïve for the purposes of being the kind of listeners who can productively attend to students’ affective needs” (412). In other words, teachers should sometimes pretend that they don’t know the answer to a question or should withhold their deeply-held convictions from their students. This kind of performed silence will help students feel more comfortable voicing their opinions or confusions or questions about an issue if they don’t feel that they have to compete with the teacher’s values/ethics/morals/beliefs. To become “strategically naïve,” as Lindquist writes, teachers make the classroom a more welcoming place for diverse student voices—and the emphasis on the teacher as holder of “correct” values is dismissed.

When the teacher asks a question:

- *Increased attention to “wait-time.”* Mary Budd Rowe, a science education theorist, coined the term “wait-time” in the 1970’s to describe the time that teachers need to give their students to respond to complex questions. In a 2003 article, Larry R. Johannessen cites Rowe, and points to the fact that “many teachers, particularly new ones, seem to be deathly afraid of silence in the classroom. However, it is important that we recognize that when we ask complex questions, we cannot expect students to be ready immediately with an answer” (78). This performance of silence is crucial to any classroom, no matter the discipline. If we adopt a pedagogy of strategic teacher-silence, the notion of “wait time” increases in importance. Over time, we can learn how long to give students before we rephrase the question or move on to a different question altogether.

When a student speaks something interesting, vexing, or brilliant:

- *Allowing for meditation before continuing dialogue.* Palmer states, “We need to abandon the notion that ‘nothing is happening’ when it is silent, to see how much new clarity a silence often brings” (80). Thus, when a student says something extraordinary, the teacher can stop the flow of conversation, by asking the student to repeat what she just said, and then say to the class, “Let’s allow that thought to sink in...” The teacher will create a silence of space that is momentarily free from further dialogue. At this time, the students and the teachers do not talk. The teacher may articulate a time period for this reflection (“Let’s reflect on that for five minutes,” etc.) or can allow the silence to continue for an unspecified, unplanned amount of time. Then, the conversation can continue, with increased clarity.

Again, this taxonomy is by no means exhaustive. Volumes could be written on specific strategies of teacher silence.

Underlying this list is the idea that teachers must have faith in students in order to allay the anxieties created by the performance. By “teaching with your mouth shut,” teachers create a meditative, open space for more active performance/participation by their students where they place “students in a challenging environment” and leave them to “explore it and struggle.” This approach to teaching requires “patience, endurance, and a faith in the students’ capacity to develop” (Finkel 126).

A potential drawback in adopting performances of silence may come in a teacher’s unfamiliarity with or perhaps inability in coping with the unexpected—with, in a word, stress.

No doubt we are all different in what we can tolerate. Holding silence can involve physical as well as psychic repercussions—some examples might be uncontrollable sweaty palms, blushing cheeks, or nagging feelings of dread and self-doubt. If one is contemplating teacher silence for the first time, or, if one has a history of anxiety (both inside and outside the classroom), my recommendation is not to treat this taxonomy as a checklist to conquer but rather as a general experiment that one might try out, spontaneously, during a course. If a moment for silence arises, take it. See what happens. It doesn’t matter how closely your situation “fits” with this given taxonomy. If, after, upon reflection, the anxiety you felt did not seem to negatively affect your general classroom ethos or your students’ development, then try more moments of silence.

3. Performing Teacher-Silence: Two Events

Two events/activities I’ve used that allow me to harness the generative, creative tool of teacher-silence are the “Open Seminar” and “Peer-for-Peer Conferences.” Instead of summarizing how these function, I offer the same instructional handouts that I offer to my students, because I believe I have, in these documents, incorporated as fully as possible an account of both “how” and “why” these activities will be used.

3.1 The Open Seminar

I have utilized the Open Seminar for the past three years.⁶ This session was originally developed by literary studies professor Donald L. Finkel. For the Open Seminar, I have adopted Finkel’s format, except I do modify three noteworthy aspects. The first is the title. Finkel referred to his invention as an “open-ended seminar.” I changed the

⁶ As a sidenote, a performance of silence—and especially the Open Seminar—will probably feel very unnatural to a teacher who has just begun to use it; as time passes, however, a performed silence can feel instinctual to a teacher.

wording a bit—to the shorter “Open Seminar.” The other change are more about the philosophical as well as methodological approach of the teacher. For Finkel, he tells his students that he is “an equal member” of the discussion who may—from time to time—speak. For me, I always tell my students that I am a “silent witness” and that I probably won’t talk at all. In fact, I emphasize the idea that the seminar is *most successful* when I don’t feel the need to talk. A final change is that, sometimes (and this fact is not mentioned on the handout), I organize the Open Seminar so that students discuss the writing of a peer and not a published author. When this happens, I remove all identifying information from the student’s essay, so that the discussion can be about the writing and not the writer.

As for pacing, I typically schedule an Open Seminar once every three weeks in a sixteen-week term. What follows is the information that I give to my students each term, about a week in advance of the first Open Seminar in a term.

How to do an “Open Seminar”

The basic concept to understand is this: all movement, all discussion, and all activity will be initiated by YOU, the student. There is no need to get permission from me in order to move from one part of the open seminar to the next. This is YOUR time. The idea of the open seminar is adapted from Donald L. Finkel’s *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut* (2000). Here is a quote from that book:

... “what happens in an open-ended seminar is not so different from what happens in an adult book group. People who have read a book in common and wish to deepen their understanding of it come together and talk about it together. They discuss selected questions, raise possible answers, examine passages...bring up aspects of their personal experience that seem relevant, make connections with points raised at previous discussions” (41).

Steps of the Open Seminar

- Students will come to class on the day of an Open Seminar having all read (for homework) a particular text.
- As class begins, students arrange themselves in a whole-class circle.
- Next, one student volunteers to stand at the front of the classroom. That person will call on those students who choose to raise their hands to offer a discussion question(s). The volunteer will write these questions on the board. After all questions are offered (as many as possible), that volunteer will lead a quick discussion to decide upon which question the class would like to start with. Volunteer then sits down.

- Next, the particular student who came up with the leading question will then elaborate on the question—explaining why she or he is interested in that particular question, and perhaps explaining the question in a bit more detail.
- The class will then freely and openly discuss with each other. No need to raise hands.
- At any point, any student may make the suggestion to move on to a new question. Students may then agree to move on, or disagree—adding a few more comments to the discussion at hand before moving forward.
- Students should also feel free to move discussion to any previous readings that were assigned for homework, if the class feels this is helpful to understanding some idea or point. Class will, ultimately, decide what they want to get out of the discussion; the only rule is that conversation must, in some way, relate to the assigned readings.
- Most likely, not all the questions on the board will end up getting discussed. That's fine. I'd rather students discuss, in depth, a single question for the whole class period as opposed to shallowly touching upon all of them.
- In sum, the students will set the agenda, do the thinking, and lead themselves as they try to make sense of a text, as they try to understand its significance and/or meaning.
- It would be a great idea for students to find a way to discuss how ideas, methods, and inspiration from the assigned reading can help with composing the major essay that students all are working on at the time.
- Remember that, for this activity, I am not the leader. Rather, I am a silent witness. On rare occasions, I may speak in order to assist in cooling down a too-heated discussion (where hateful language is being used, for example—hopefully that won't happen) or to clarify a fact. Remember that a fact is something that probably cannot be disputed while an interpretation is; for example, a fact might be “The text was written in 1998” and an interpretation could be “The text was written in a cool way.”)

Goals of the Open Seminar:

- I expect to learn from the discussion, to think about the text in new ways.
 - For all to have fun and learn.
 - To dive deeply into passages of concern (books should be open, pages should be turning, passages should be read aloud sometimes, etc.)
 - The purpose of this seminar is to deepen understanding of a text that everyone has read in common.
 - To have a place to broach questions and to make discoveries, without feeling pressured to have to seek or say the “correct” interpretation.
 - To transform the classroom into an engaged community.
-

- To embrace, and become comfortable with, moments of silence.
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3.2 The Peer-for-Peer Conference

This is a performative teacher silence event that I recently developed. Thus far, I've only had the chance to use this for a single academic term. However, preliminary analysis—based upon student interviews and written student commentary I solicited (which I will discuss in the following section)—has led to my decision to continue using and refining this class activity. In the semester in which I utilized it, in the context of a first-year writing course, students met with each other to discuss their progress toward composing the final paper of the course. At this time in the term, students were already quite familiar with each other as classmates, which was, I think, a key to the success of this activity. A revision I will implement during the next semester will be to not only have students meet at the beginning (at the brainstorming/research) phase, but also later, as they work toward final drafts⁷. This activity merits its implementation not just once in a sixteen-week term, but twice. What follows is the information that I give to my students, about a week in advance of this event.

How to do the “Peer-for-Peer Conferences”

Protocol: In this 20-minute conference, you will meet in pre-selected groups of 3-4 students. Before your conference, you will prepare a 2-3 minute informal speech (you can use notecards or simply use memory; I suggest that you don't bring laptops—staring at screens won't make these sessions as productive) that overviews your progress on your paper. Some aspects you might discuss are: detailing your thesis statement, explaining the sources you think you might use and why those sources are valuable, and/or describing your feelings about this assignment. In addition, prepare 1-2 questions you have about composing your paper or fulfilling the assignment. Your peers will then give you honest feedback in response to your questions.

What will make this “Peer-for-Peer Conference” different from other group conferences you may have attended in the past is this: Teacher silence will, again, play a major role—just as it does in the Open Seminar. While you and your peers are discussing, I will simply witness and listen attentively. My role is simple but important: **I will act as audience for each group.** I will be a witness to your conversation. Why? Good question. Because having an audience affects a performance (think of the difference between a dress-rehearsal and the night of the big play). In my experience, the kinds of conversations students have with a teacher present are quite different than

⁷ I am grateful for this revision idea, which was given to me by Taylor, one of the three interviewees that I quote in the next section.

the ones they will have without that teacher there. In other words, what you say to each other will be shaped by my silent presence. I am hoping that my silent presence will guide you to push yourselves to be more critical of your ideas—to carefully plan the precise words with which you describe your project to your classmates; in addition, I am hoping that you will give your peers robust, thoughtful feedback to their question(s); finally, I am hoping that you will be more open to sharing what you know about the writing process—that you don't hold back.

...It's time to shine.

Prepare Questions for Peers, Not Teacher: It is important to understand that I will remain silent throughout the entirety of the conference, except to greet you and call the conference to a close. Thus, if you have questions for me (that you feel you do not want to ask your peers), please schedule a separate conference with me. The goal is for you to learn to lean on the advice of your peers, learn how to collaborate, and learn to rhetorically analyze the advice you want to use and do not want to use during the composing of your paper. This is an important skill: learning which piece(s) of advice you want to take into account and which you want to discard. The peer-for-peer conference is not about taking the teacher's advice, but, rather considering peer advice, offering your own advice to your peers, and practicing in-person, intellectual face-to-face communication to a live audience of interested intellectuals.

I look forward to witnessing your conversation!

4. Student Voices

4.1 *Methods*

My call for teachers to adopt performed silences stems from the myriad positive reactions I have received from students. Since I began the Open Seminar three years ago, I have gauged student engagement via one-on-one conferences, institutional course evaluations, as well as more informal evaluations that students have written, in response to questions posed that ask students to articulate the outcomes, concerns, benefits, or problems they had with the Open Seminar as well as my general pedagogical silence-in-the-classroom approach.

As I began to develop my structured silence activity, the Peer-for-Peer Conference, I obtained IRB approval and began documenting student evaluations of teacher-silence in a more formal way, during a first-year writing course of twenty-three stu-

dents at Bowling Green State University.⁸ All students in the course were given the option to participate. They were also given the option to give their opinions while remaining anonymous. I collected and analyzed student voices via response essays, short answer surveys⁹, and face-to-face interviews with three students: Kyla, Bryan, and Taylor¹⁰. These data-collection techniques provided a fascinating picture of how students experienced my and others' silences.

In evaluating student preferences, attitudes, and reactions in a measured, comprehensive way, I began to draw conclusions about the possible effects that teacher-silence as well as silence in general may have when used in the classroom. Additionally, these student responses may provide answers to the following questions: 1) What do performed teacher silences really *do*? 2) What educational benefits/outcomes do silence activities achieve? 3) What are some of the difficulties that a teacher must navigate when adopting silence?

4.2 Response Essays

Participants composed brief evaluative response essays, which expressed their reactions to the Open Seminar as well as the general use of teacher-silence. In order to receive more well-thought-out responses, I encouraged students to just focus on any two of these four questions:

#1. Did you learn anything new about yourself as a result of the Open Seminar meetings we've had this term? If yes, please describe. If no, please analyze why you think these meetings did not stimulate personal insights.

#2. Do you feel that the Open Seminar meetings were educationally beneficial or were not educationally beneficial to you? In what specific ways were they beneficial? If they were not beneficial, please explain why you think these meetings did not seem beneficial.

#3. What is your overall impression of the act of a teacher staying silent?

#4. What was your view of teacher-silence in the classroom at the start of the term? Did that view change over the course of the term? If it changed, how did

⁸ Although students were notified at the beginning of the semester, student consent was obtained after the conclusion of the course and grades were submitted.

⁹ The essays and surveys were composed/submitted anonymously. I asked for anonymity so students might feel more comfortable expressing any negative critiques they might have.

¹⁰ Kyla, Bryan, and Taylor were given the option to utilize pseudonyms. However, all three (strongly) insisted that they wanted to keep their real names for this study. They expressed excitement in being a part of my research, and wished to keep their names intact. Thus—although it deviates from typical practice—I have complied with my students' desires.

it change? If it did not change, please speculate as to why your view remained stable.

Overall, in reviewing responses¹¹ what I learned is that a teacher's silence feels, at first, incredibly uncomfortable for students—yet, ultimately, that discomfort leads to various learning outcomes, whether personally, socially, spiritually, or academically. A teacher's silence gives frustration, yes, but it also provides them with a wider space, with an incentive to talk more, talk more boldly, and talk with a heightened sense of personal freedom. Students spoke of gaining “confidence,” “leadership abilities,” and of slowly overcoming public speaking phobias. Some talked about how silence was a refreshing break from the “overly-chatty” norm of our culture. The following (each paragraph is from a different student) is what some had to say about learning to express themselves in new ways, about coming to voice.

Student #1: I felt that the three open seminars were beneficial educationally because they gave you the chance to speak out to the class on your opinion on a subject and get feedback from your peers on their opinion on the same subject. This would result in agreements or divergence in the ideas. Overall showing different perspectives on a topic. This can help you in many different ways by hearing ideas you may not of ever thought about or understanding how others think or feel differently than how you see things in your own eyes...Giving them the feeling that they have no boundaries on what they want to talk about on the subject. Giving the students freedom to speak their ideas and not have guidelines or a quota to meet in order to be doing the right thing.

Student #2: Teacher silence allows us to be involved. The open seminar opened my mind. It has a large scholastic value not only for writing but for things like: public speaking, leadership skills, critical thinking, debating, and gaining more perspective, to name a few. My impression of my teacher staying silent makes me feel important. Not as controlled, more free. I think that silence in the classroom along with less intervention from teachers would be a positive thing for students.

Student #3: With the teacher staying silent, it forces us to come out of our shells and speak what we believe. It was difficult at first to speak my mind, but now I feel like I am able to converse more freely. When the teacher is silent it lets the

¹¹ Eighteen students responded in total. These hard-copy essay responses were composed outside of official class time, and a student volunteer submitted these anonymous responses to me. Since students completed a majority of their writing via computers—and when they did submit hand-written documents/assignments during the term, these were as un-signed journal entries or other anonymous freewriting exercises—I could not, therefore, detect whose response belonged to whom, as I was wholly unfamiliar with their handwriting.

students be more open. We can learn a lot from the teacher, but what I have found out is that we can learn even more from our peers.

In these responses, silence can be seen as having multiple effects and intentions. Once the teacher's voice is temporarily retracted, there is space for a more divergent and more-empowered mix of student voices. The performed silence allows for a more free-flowing movement of voices, with less fear of being shut down. During times of teacher-silence, the students feel less threat of interruption by the teacher, who, they understand, occupies a different position of power in the system of schooling. In this particular moment in history, a time where Wall Street has been "occupied," it seems especially fitting for teachers to find ways to allow for moments where young adults can voice together to try new viewpoints, without fear of censorship. Of course, it is necessary to make clear to students that they cannot use rude, violent, or hateful speech during Open Seminars or other times of teacher-silence. Thus far, I have only *once* had to step in and redirect a conversation—and this was only due to the fact that two students were simply dominating the conversation (that is, talking too much and boring their classmates). In that situation, all I had to say was something like, "Let's hear from some other voices"—and the two students seemed to immediately understand my meaning; for the rest of that class period, they took predominantly listening roles.

What surprised me most in analyzing these essays is the extent to which students feel inhibited by "normal" teaching moments where teacher-silence is *not* in play. I suspected that students felt this way. Yet, oddly, the more I came across this sentiment in my students' writing, the more flabbergasted I felt in regards to higher education as a whole (I began to even question the very idea that a class *needs to have* an expert/teacher!)...but, I also felt very relieved that I had been incorporating silence into my pedagogy. A subtheme of student inhibition is the idea that students constantly worry about "offending their professor"—worrying that what they say will clash with the professors' knowledge, morals, or opinions. In the Open Seminar in particular, no matter the skill level (perceived or real), students are free to use their own voices, diction, syntax; they are free to voice their unique confusions, insights, values, and ethics—freer from fear. More views can come to the surface; multiplicity and disagreement and confusion and paradox and exploration can reign. The Open Seminar dances the delicate dance between awkward/boring and exciting/exhilarating. As one student explains, the Open Seminar is something of a paradox:

At the beginning of the term I thought silence in the classroom was super awkward. I wanted the professor to break the silence to keep the discussion on track; now I am used to the quiet in the classroom. Silence allows students to collect their thoughts and take in what was just stated by a peer. Also you are able to form opinions to either refute or agree with the said position. It is sometimes boring to look around and see heads down while all you hear is the ticking of the clock, but to me I can see brains churning new ideas to share. I say keep silence

in the classroom because it will force others outside of their comfort zones and maybe reveal leaders in the classroom who will take charge when all else is silent.

Further, the notion of “force” is a theme that continued to arise across these short essay responses. Students wrote of how the teacher “forced them to get involved” through the use of silence. Students wrote of how forcing them to get into a circle was, in effect, forcing them “to be seen”—to not be able to hide, to feel the sometimes jarring possibility of all eyes on them when they spoke or didn’t speak, which contrasted with the usual desk-in-straight-rows classroom formation. Some difficulties students mentioned are that, in the beginning of the term, due to not yet being accustomed to one another, “forcing” conversations to get going during the Open Seminar was particularly awkward, and, at times, grueling. What’s clear is that teacher-silence does not automatically produce a nice, “feel-good” classroom.

Another crucial point is that not all students will, when given the chance, rise to become leaders (or even effective collaborators) during times of teacher silence. Some students may not speak up as much as others and some may not talk at all. But, paradoxically, this does not spell failure. One of my students put it best: “Yes, I feel that I learned something new about myself. I learned that I love to be quiet and listen to what others are saying and thinking. I also learned that I do like to voice my thoughts and have them be heard.” Indeed, a key learning experience/outcome is deeper listening. There is a balance to be achieved: that between being brave enough to talk and being brave enough to be an active listener, a witness to other voices. The fact that some of my more shy students gained new insights—whether academic, personal, etc.—through performed teacher silences has been evident to me through the various out-of-class conversations I’ve had with students. On one particular occasion, toward the end of a semester, a student stopped by my office to “apologize” for not speaking up more during Open Seminars. During our conversation, however, she expressed to me that her capacity for listening had grown to a deeper level, and that she now valued more all the “diverse” opinions that were able to surface as a result of teacher silence. Therefore, adopting teacher silence as a strategy for an empowered learning space should not include the desire to push all students toward the same goal of speaking more or louder. We should not aim for noise. I agree with literature teacher Paul T. Corrigan that too many words can create noise rather than education/learning:

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... 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... 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. (9–10)

Along these lines, one of the core goals for teacher-silence must be to encourage richer listening moments.

One thing I have done is to gently encourage, at the start of the term, the idea that even the more reserved students of a class can learn to speak up occasionally, asking follow-up questions of their more talkative peers. For instance, saying something as simple as “Can you say more about that?” does a huge measure in propelling discussion forward. Thus, teachers who adopt silences must take the time at various points during the semester to discuss various strategies for both listening and for simple yet effective ways to contribute, whether that means deep listening, asking questions, taking voice, or simply enjoying the silence as a time of reflection when it does, inevitably, arise.

4.3 Short Answer Surveys

Seventeen students opted to take my survey, which was focused on student evaluations of the Peer-for-Peer Conference (PfPC). Identities of all student respondents were kept anonymous.¹² Students were asked to compose a “brief response” to two questions: 1) “How do you think the conference would have been different if Mrs. Trahan would have lead the conference and/or spoken during it?” 2) Please describe your gut reactions to having to lead yourselves today, to having Mrs. Trahan as a silent audience to your conversation?” Here are some notable responses:¹³

Student #1: I enjoyed leading myself because I really liked the small conference setting. I feel as if I talk a lot more when there are a smaller number of people. Leading myself helped me to speak of my ideas without being rushed or interrupted by the teacher.

Student #2: I felt that it was at first slow and weird. But as it went on everything was good & ideas were shared easily.

Student #3: If the teacher had talked, I would have been less prone to give in depth personal responses.

Student #4: The peer conference let us talk. Let our brains and ideas flow without walls or restrictions. I enjoyed it alot. I feel like if Mrs. Trahan would have led the conference that we peers would have talked less and been looking for Mrs. Trahan to step in.

¹² These surveys were collected in the same manner as the essay responses I discussed previously.

¹³ Each paragraph break indicates a different student voice.

Student#5: I could tell my group really got into it. Now we all probably are going to write better papers. For me, I think I have a nicer grasp on my research, what sources I'm going to use.

Overall, students seemed less anxious about teacher-silence in the context of the PfPC compared to the Open Seminar, though there was still a fair amount of discussion about gut reactions of feeling “awkward” or “nervous.” One student even mentioned feeling the urge to giggle during the conference due to nervousness. Certainly, strong emotions are at play here, just as in the Open Seminar.

It appears that students enjoyed the PfPC and felt the activity was beneficial in the task of working toward their paper. Unfortunately, though, a handful of students expressed that some of their peers were ill prepared for the conference (no doubt, a situation which can happen even in situations where teachers are more vocal). A possible corrective to this would be to ask students to submit copies of their preparatory materials to their teacher in advance of the conference date, in hopes that this will motivate students to spend more time reflecting upon the kinds of questions they need to ask their peers as well as the specific ways they will present their in-progress projects to their peers.

4.4 Interviews

The interview process began with sporadic, informal, unstructured “chats” that occurred between myself and Kyla, Bryan, and Taylor fairly frequently throughout the term. These three first-year college students were aware of the formal research I would be conducting once the semester had concluded (after I had obtained IRB approval), and, from the start of our term together, they had a sense that they wanted to take part in the project. Over the term, whether during class meetings or during student-teacher conferences, these students were extremely vocal in sharing concerns, questions, and excitement regarding teacher silence. After the term had concluded, Kyla, Bryan, and Taylor gave official consent and then met with me, each for an hour-long interview.

Rather than trying to force meaning by mediating your thought-processes as you read these student voices, I encourage you to, in the spirit of Buddhist meditative contemplation—to “see for yourself”¹⁴ about how to make connections, draw conclusions, and consider the potential benefits of performances of teacher silence. Therefore, these extended quotations serve the dual of purpose of honoring both my readers (trusting them to take what they need from the words), as well as my three inter-

¹⁴ The principle of “see for yourself” was taught by the Buddha and is echoed in the teachings of the current Dalai Lama.

view participants by allowing them the chance to speak for themselves—without my teacher/interpretative voice in the background—and with a backdrop of silence¹⁵.

Kyla¹⁶:

Before our class, I always thought that silence was really awkward. But, then, being in class, and having silence in it, kind of changed my views. For me, silence kind of felt like brainstorming, and, um, it was, like, needed for discussion and things like that. When you would ask a question and everyone was silent, at first I was like “Oh gosh this is so awkward”...but then I was like: “You know what? Let me think about this question more and see how it relates to the topic we are trying to discuss right now.” So that’s how I think about silence now. Not as awkward but more as like, the brain’s working. It [the Open Seminar] make me think more critically. And like read not just to read but to actually understand and think about and process information better. For the first open seminar, I just read the article, just read it...and didn’t really think too much about it, um, but on the second one, I actually read it and tried to think of it in different ways and tried read it in different ways and see like what was she [the author] trying to tell me in this or what does she want me to get out of this article, basically. So it helped me read a lot better. So now when I’m reading, I’m not just reading the line, I’m trying to *understand* it.

I think it [the Peer-for-Peer Conference] lets the people who are quiet in the class get to speak more and you finally get to hear their voice and hear their, um, ideas and things like that. That’s why I like peer-to-peer conferences better than the Open Seminar because it’s less intimidating and it’s a more comfortable setting. Plus it’s Starbucks—and it was more like informal type. We’re not in this cold stale classroom; we’re in a more comforting environment.

Bryan¹⁷:

The reason that this [The Open Seminar] is helpful is that you don’t have that teacher constantly talking...it’s like kind of like in a lecture where students zone out halfway through because...they may not think that they already know it, but just that one voice going on, it’s really boring, tedious, kind ofand with the open seminar, it gives each student a chance to say what they feel. And it shows not only that they read the information or they did what they were supposed to do, but it shows that they understood it. I mean, for me, the first one that we did,

¹⁵ In this interview section, ellipses do not signify that I took anything out; rather it signifies that the speaker paused for a moderate or long amount of time. I have retained the students’ speech just as I heard it.

¹⁶ Kyla is a criminal justice major.

¹⁷ Bryan is majoring in music theory and composition.

I didn't talk very much, and I remember not talking very much. That's cause I was really nervous to really say what I was thinking; but by the second one, I mean, once we got through the second one, I started to talk more and more...and it's because I knew that when I talked, it was...not only a chance for me to get my ideas out, but really it helped me understand what I was reading because I was getting these opinions on my ideas and it was definitely beneficial to the overall learning process.

Like I said earlier, the first Open Seminar I didn't really talk at all; by the last one I was one of the people talking the most. And it let me know that I wasn't that shy person; that I can really broaden out, say what I feel, say what I'm thinking and it let me become more open with who I am—in a sense, that I could talk how I wanted, I could say exactly what I was feeling, thinking and not have to keep my ideas and thoughts inside. I mean...it's not that I was shy; it's just that in my other classes, I just didn't talk very much. I'd listen to the teacher, and I'd do well on the tests and homework because I understood the information, but I didn't really talk. And later on last semester and now this semester, in *all* of my classes, except for my lecture—because nobody talks in there—I find myself talking a lot more, because I feel like I can talk more openly and ask questions and give out my ideas and a lot of the times it's been really helpful because I've noticed things...like in my music theory class, I noticed that the teacher did something wrong. Before I would have just let it go; maybe someone else would catch it—but, like, now, I actually called it out, and the teacher thanked me.

Taylor¹⁸:

Well, I really liked that we talked about our personal papers [in the Peer-for-Peer Conference]. It really...when you sit there and talk to yourself...thinking to yourself...you get kind of lost in your ideas. So when you can bounce them off other people, I think that really helped. You can get rid of the bad ones and focus on the good ones. Or, you know what your strong suit is in a paper. Or, I mean, I was able to get ideas on resources—where I could look to get more information to back up about what I was thinking about in my paper.

I don't know if everyone got what I got out of it [the Open Seminar]. I think it depends on the student, on how you take certain things...You get out of something that you put into something. So, if you put the effort in to read the article, even if you weren't as involved in the seminar, I still got something out of it...even though I wasn't the one that really stepped up and wrote the questions on the board or directed the seminar. So I was more of an observer.

¹⁸ Taylor is majoring in education. She aspires to be either a high school or elementary teacher.

5. Toward a Meditative Space

In opening, I mentioned that a teacher's goal needs to be a plurality of learning. Students need to of course learn the planned subject matter, but also learn *other* lessons: about life, about past/present/future, about self, about interactions with others. In this way, the classroom itself becomes, in a way, a kind of *extended meditation*—because one of the key aspects of meditation is that we never know quite what is going to happen once we allow ourselves to sink into meditation. We might cry. We might lose our balance. We might be confronted by happy or mournful memories from our past. Anything can happen. The same is true for the kind of classroom that includes teacher silence.

It is necessary to remind teachers that the success of a performed silence is dependent upon the rhetorical situation. Especially where strategic silence is involved, a teacher must make “continuous sensitive readings of the learning environment” (Ollin 265), for silences can be misinterpreted by students, as they have a massive range of possible meanings. Silence can be interpreted as sarcastic, incompetent, bored, sulking (Gilmore), threatening, judging, hierarchical, punishing, rude, combative, or vengeful. When not properly qualified to our students, silence can have an abusing effect and affect within the classroom. Therefore, we must mitigate these risks by explaining—all along the way—what our intentions are. We must let our students know our philosophies. We can include statements on our syllabi that prepare students for silence; we can include something similar to the following:

Your teachers in other classes will have different philosophies about how to act in the classroom or what classrooms are for or what should happen in a classroom. All teachers are different in what they expect and believe. Of course. Diversity is natural and good. But since it can be confusing (and perhaps frustrating!) to try to figure out what kind of a teacher I am, I thought it might be helpful for me to be up-front with you about some of my personal beliefs about the kind of classroom community I'd like us to build...

Sometimes I might say “I don't know” or “I don't know, let me get back to you” or “I don't know, let me think about that.” Sometimes, you might say “I don't know.” Sometimes, when I ask you a question, you will only be able to respond to part of the matter. Or, maybe it will take you weeks to come to an answer. (Or maybe you won't understand until years later, long after this course has passed.) These are actually symptoms of a healthy learning environment. Wisdom means acknowledging that we cannot know all things at all times.

Sometimes, also, I won't immediately know the answer to one of your questions. Or, sometimes, you won't have a quick response to what I ask you. Therefore, I encourage you to *embrace* the silence: for it is a space for gathering ideas and collectively considering the complexity of a situation. Because issues and questions in writing classes are never simply right vs. wrong/true vs. false, let's not fear silence in the classroom, but rather recognize it as beneficial for learning. Silence

does not mean you are incompetent or failing (unless, of course, silence is a result of your not completing the assigned work—but that’s a whole other matter!). Often, silence simply means we are being honest enough not to speak yet.

Further, I encourage you to be brave. If you think of yourself as “shy,” please try to break that routine—and speak out. We want to hear your ideas.

A version of this philosophy has been on my first-year writing syllabus for a few years now, and it has served me well, aiding in adjusting my students to the kind of classroom I hope to facilitate. During the first day/week of the term, we read the statement out loud, discuss, ask questions—and then I remember to invite questions and anticipate concerns regarding performances of teacher silence (and student silence) throughout the rest of the term.

Through continual dialogue and through strategically-placed silence, we can learn with our students. We can transform and become transformed. This brave new space can happen through small ways, through the exploration of the taxonomy I have set out—of moments where brief and meaningful silences can aid in learning and student empowerment—and/or through implementation of more extended teacher silence events, such as the Open Seminar or the Peer-for-Peer Conferences. It takes risk to create this odd, often-quirky, often-revelatory meditative and performative classroom...but it’s a risk well worth it. A risk where we learn through and from silence.

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