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The Sound of Silence: The Value of Quiet Contemplation in the Classroom

AS A COLLEGE STUDENT, I was rarely the first to raise my hand or respond to a question posed during class. I was shy by nature and always felt like I had little to offer. There were times, however, that I would interject simply to break the long silence after the instructor asked a question. In those cases, the silence was either too uncomfortable to bear or I figured that my response would be no worse than anyone else's. There was also the threat of a pop quiz or some other academic challenge looming for the unresponsive class, which included students who obviously either did not know the content or had not read the assignment. I believe this is an experience all college students have faced at one time or another.

When I became an instructor, I was now on the other side of the equation. I was asking questions for several reasons; to gauge students' understanding of course concepts, to determine if they had completed reading assignments, and mainly to start an engaging discussion. But once again, those silences followed many of the questions I posed. It was a concern for me because I felt I had failed as an educator. Either my expectations were too high or my assignments were not designed well enough to cover course concepts and goals.

The scenario is all too familiar to most educators. The instructor asks a question to the class, the class either looks down or passes quick glances around the room to see if anyone looks like they are about to answer, and if no one is giving any indication of preparing a response the atmosphere becomes tense. Eventually, either some brave soul will wade into the discussion in the hopes of breaking the awkward silence, or the instructor will answer the question and continue on.

But why is that silence so uncomfortable?

Silence is a powerful force. By its nature it builds anticipation, and that can be where the stress comes in from the student's perspective. Silence used for contemplation has a place in discussions, but as educators we need to establish a classroom climate that takes the tension out of silence. So how do we do that? Here are some approaches to consider:

One possible technique is to preface any question with a qualifying parameter such as "Take a moment and consider…" or "Think about (how, what, why) for a moment." This lets the students know that an immediate answer is not required, while also making the point that you expect a moment of quiet contemplation.

Another approach is to display the questions on an overhead or projector in class at the beginning and throughout the class period. This gives the students a chance to preview the question and begin thinking about a response. Their reflection can take place in a more holistic sense, and they can consider their answers within the context of the additional related course material that's being presented. This allows students the time many of them need to synthesize new information and apply it to their response.

And who is to say that such moments cannot take place, at least partially, outside of class time? Informing students of summary questions either at the prior class meeting or via email a few days before class might help prompt them to consider their responses, especially if you are explicit in setting the expectation that they need to come prepared to discuss these specific topics. Some students will come ready to discuss while others can continue to contemplate their response during a more active discussion. The silence is displaced, while the benefits still remain.

In these examples, you are asking students to consider an answer rather than regurgitate information, so responses to factual or definition-based questions may not be a good fit for such an approach. The goal is to create a less tense atmosphere with better reflection and to use the silence, when present, in a positive way.

Part of our mission as educators is to create thoughtful individuals, and creating and encouraging a moment of silent reflection can have a positive effect on that mission. So enjoy the silence and the benefits it can bring.

Rocky Diley, EdD, Teaching and Learning; The Sound of Silence: The Value of Quiet Contemplation in the Classroom; Faculty Focus; April 21, 2014; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/sound-silence-

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What's an Empowered Student?

THAT WAS THE QUESTION, followed by, "Are they students who want to take over the classroom?" "No," I replied, "it's about how students approach learning—motivated, confident, and ready to tackle the task."

Unfortunately, "empowered" is not how many of our students approach learning. They sigh, think about how hard it's going to be, think about how they aren't going to like it, worry that they're probably not smart enough, wonder if there might be some easier way, and wish they didn't have to undertake such an arduous task. And if they do try and don't instantly succeed, they give up quickly. We've all seen how students who aren't empowered respond to new learning tasks.

Like many widely used descriptors in higher education, "empowered learners" has acquired a more generic meaning, and that is unfortunate because it's the specific meanings that give this moniker its teeth. As a concept, empowerment was first used to describe a kind of relationship between managers and employees. It was defined as "the process of creating intrinsic task motivation by providing an environment and tasks which increase one's sense of self-efficacy and energy." (Frymier, Shulman and Houser, pp. 182-3)

Thomas and Velthouse offered one of the first specific descriptions by identifying four dimensions of empowerment.

1. **Meaningfulness** – This describes the value of the task in relation to individual beliefs, ideals, and standards. If the work you need to do doesn't have much or any meaning to you, doesn't seem to hold much or any importance, then there isn't much or any motivation to work hard and produce quality work.
2. **Competence** – Here's the confidence piece. Empowerment derives from feeling qualified and capable of performing the work. You can handle what you're being asked to do.
3. **Impact** – The more impact you believe you will have, the more motivation you feel to work hard. You are empowered if you believe you're doing work that makes a difference—work that matters and is important.
4. **Choice** – This dimension relates to whether you get to determine the task goals and how you will accomplish them. The more choice you have, the more empowered you feel.

It's an easy transition to take these descriptions of what it means to be empowered in the business world and apply them to the classroom—changing from managers to teachers and employees to students. And much research verifies the relevance of empowerment to education. When students are empowered, they learn more, and they learn better.

So how do we help those tentative, cautious learners who are lack confidence in themselves and, above all else, want learning to be pleasant and painless? There is good news: Teachers can play a key role in empowering learners. They don't do it with baseless hype about how wonderful students are or how students can do anything (especially when they know those students are missing key skills). They do it with accurate descriptions of those actions learners must take in order to succeed. They make the tasks clear and explain what steps to take and in what order. They do it by identifying relevant resources and they do it by supporting student efforts.

Then, after they've done that for a while, they start asking students to identify the actions they need to take, in what order, as well as locate whatever resources they may need to complete the task successfully. Teachers celebrate successes with students, even small ones, and teachers are there showing students how to make learning experiences out of failures. Students are empowered by good coaching.

Beyond teacher-student relationships, teachers can empower students by making sure the work students do is meaningful and important. Authentic assignments empower students. And finally, teachers need to talk about how beliefs affect behavior. Student beliefs about what they can and can't learn powerfully influence what they do and don't learn. The Frymier, et. al. reference includes sample questions from the instrument they developed that students can use to understand why they should work toward becoming empowered learners. Empowered learners do better in courses and in life.

References:

Frymier, A. B., Shulman, G. M., and Houser, M. (1996). The development of a learner empowerment measure. Communication Education, 45 (3), 181-199.

Thomas, K., and Velthouse, B. (1990). Cognitive elements of empowerment: An "interpretive" mode of intrinsic task motivation. Academy of Management Review, 15, 666-681.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; Teaching Professor Blog; What's an Empowered Student? Faculty Focus; April 16, 2014; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/whats-empowered-student/]; May 2, 2014

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