

Inviting/Improving Student Participation

“We’re a culture fearful of silence.”

--Pat Belanoff, 2001.

“Silence, then, can be a process of active engagement with the ideas of others.”

-- Mary Reda, 2009.

Common Challenges:

- A number of students never respond.
- The discussion in the class is dominated by a few highly vocal students.
- Discussions may dwindle away instead of developing.

Research Shows:

- Sometimes students are being “productively” silent, not bored, “tuned-out” or confused. Quiet time is often part of the thought process, and students may not respond to every prompt or question in every class.
- There are a number of complex factors, not just teaching style, that cause students to be quiet in class.
- The way that an instructor phrases or addresses questions will determine the kinds of responses.

Some WAC/WID Suggestions:

- **Use brief, informal writing assignments during and outside class to prepare students for discussion.** Low-stakes assignments such as journal writing and in-class freewriting to discussion questions will allow students to formulate and articulate their thoughts in advance, emboldening any shy students to participate more. During these writing tasks, you may even ask students to pose their own questions and answer them.
- **Create moments for productive silence.** Invite students to respond in writing to various things in the course throughout the semester, including difficult course content or even grades they’ve received. Dialogue between students and teachers will ensure that your class silence is not a result of student resistance. Consider having students write anonymously at the end of class; this will encourage an egalitarian environment where everyone’s voice is significant.
- **Remind students that participation is part of their grade.** If students are reminded that class participation is part of the course comment, the likelihood that they will participate will be greater. Some of the quieter students may opt to meet their participation requirements by writing additional low-stakes assignments rather than speaking.

- **Try to change the silent classroom dynamic that may have formed early on in the semester.** Ask students to change their seats so that those in front and the back have equal chances to contribute. Assign small-group discussions so that non-vocal students have more opportunity to speak. Pose an open-ended assignment and ask students to work together to solve it. Better discussions and learning-centered tasks like these will benefit both you and your students.

Further Reading:

Belanoff, Pat. "Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 52: 3 (2001): 399-428.

Belanoff addresses the idea of silence as a positive and negative aspect in the classroom. She introduces ways of getting students to write and overcome their "silences" through writing, particularly in first drafts. She further shows that teachers can get over silences by understanding their causes.

Collins, Janet. *The Quiet Child*. London: Cassell, 1996.

Collins examines the children who are overlooked in the classroom because they do not say anything and are classified as "quiet" and "shy." She argues for children who need special attention and offers ways of drawing the quiet or silent students out more.

Delpit, Lisa. "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review* 58: 3 (1988): 180-298.

Delpit introduces the notion of students having a meaningful voice in writing. She suggests the ways that students contribute to the dialogue and discussion. Her article demonstrates that students of color and women are less likely to express their opinions because of they were reluctant to talk before.

Finkel, Donald L. *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000.

Donald Finkel challenges the way that teachers transmit information to students, suggesting that students are not to be "fed" or "led" to answers. The students should be posed questions with many answers and prompts to get the class through a meaningful dialogue.

Reda, Mary. *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2009.

Reda's text is the first serious study on the subject of silence in

higher education. She does an admirable job of addressing the issue of silence in education and students who do not speak in class. She provides evidence from her own research of why students do not speak or choose not to speak. Ultimately Reda's text offers important alternatives to both speaking and engaging all of her students in class.

Reda's Thoughts on Silence:

"They've written; they've been physically present; some times they've even tried to laugh at my jokes. But not one of them has spoken. Their silence, their sheer determination *not* to say anything, their presence reproaches me."

Reda, 2009, p. 1

"These quiet students constitute a central classroom tension for many teachers — those who have a theoretical grounding in dialogic and collaborative learning; those who value it on a practical or an experiential level; and those who construct themselves as simply wanting to hear the voice of their students."

Reda, 2009, p. 5

"It is not enough to say we will study *about* silence in classrooms; we must also explore it *with* our classes. Working alone, there is little opportunity for growth. Teachers create requirements, and students may comply or resist or resent or misunderstand these expectations. But a critical dialogue about a teacher's values and expectations and her students' experiences and perspectives invites a more complete vision — an expansion of the ways we think about each other, our classrooms, and the value of silence.

Reda, 2009, p. 19

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