THE SOUND OF STUDENTS THINKING: STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING CLASSROOM CONVERSATION

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In the final days before graduating college, I saw a professor with whom I had taken a class the previous semester. I told her what a wonderful class it was, what a brilliant teacher she was, what marvelous discussions our class had. All of this was true. She was astonishingly smart. She asked questions that were challenging and provocative, and, most importantly, she created an atmosphere that genuinely encouraged class discussion.

Sure, there were some problems with that class. Some days had been better than others, and one student had tried her best to hijack the discussions. Although I was typically a pretty quiet student, sometimes I found myself raising my hand defensively, just to keep that student from talking. Even so, I thought this professor's teaching was impressive because of the real conversations she had elicited. We weren't just going through the motions; we wanted to be there talking to each other, to her. This was the way English classes should work.

"Really?" she said, the surprise in her voice unmistakable. "Class discussions always seemed... hmm, a bit flat." I don't think I'd seen her at a loss for words before that day. "I often wondered how I could get students more engaged in the conversation." She paused. "I wondered how to get you talking."

More than a dozen years later, that conversation still haunts me. Perhaps this is the voice of disappointment: I wanted that

professor to see us the way we saw her. I wanted the truth of that class to be that my peers and I had engaging, smart conversations. I wanted her to be impressed with us, with *me*.

But I think there's more here than a perpetual good student wanting to earn her professor's approval. Two years after that conversation when I taught my first composition classes, the silence of students, students like me, took on a whole new life. And my professor's words echoed uncomfortably.

I wasn't alone. Giddy with ideas about student-centered teaching, what my cohort of graduate trainees worried about was not our ability to create good assignments, offer effective feedback, or convey information about writing conventions. What we agonized over— endlessly— was whether we could have "good discussions" with our students. This seemed to many of us the very heart of good teaching: *could we get students to talk?* What would we do if no one spoke? How would we face their blank, hostile faces? What was the secret that all our great teachers knew about engaging students? And why did no one tell us?

These days, as I leave my first-year composition workshop, my graduate seminar in composition theory, my undergrad literature class, I suspect I feel much as my literature professor had many years ago. The quantity and quality of my students' voices and silences resonate as I evaluate the class's successes and failures, the work that was accomplished. Who spoke? Who didn't? Who never speaks? What does that say about their learning? Their engagement? What questions worked? Which didn't? Why? What changes can—should—be made? How can I facilitate the kinds of brilliant conversations I imagine happening in the classrooms flanking mine?

Often, I find myself confused, exasperated, tired. Sometimes, I'm simply angry. Angry at the men who line the back row, at the women who stare so intently at their notebooks they never meet my eyes, at the students who have perfected an elegant shrug that manages to convey disdain, disapproval, disengagement. *Don't they know they're cheating themselves? What do they think they're*

gaining by opting out of the discussion? Why do they want to make my job so damn much harder?

This article explores the results of a study that grew out of all these concerns. My former professor's disappointment, the anxieties I felt as a brand-new teacher, the questions I ask myself after so many classes led me to design a study to explore students' perceptions of classroom conversation and silence. This investigation ultimately led me to see student silence as a far more complex interaction than the stories we teachers tend to tell. The explanations we construct often equate silence with failure, failure of the students who will not participate, failure of the teachers who can't make a discussion "work." However, these students had constructed cohesive, complicated understandings of their interactions with peers, teachers, their writing, and their definitions of "self" and community that did not rely on the vocabulary of failure. Rarely did these students see simplistic solutions to the "problem" of silence.

The Roots of These Questions about Dialogue: Theoretical Grounding

For many composition teachers, our interest in collaborative learning has its foundations in Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia— the inherently shared nature of language and the environment in which language takes place. This notion of conversation between peers as a meaning-making enterprise fundamental to learning to think and write better underlies the work of composition scholars from across the field. Indeed, Kenneth Bruffee's argument for the importance of conversation and reaching consensus shapes our practice: for one to think well, one "must learn to talk well collectively— that is, [one] must learn to converse well" (640). Still others draw explicitly on Paulo Freire's critique of the "banking method" of education. For example, in *Empowering Education* Ira Shor argues:

In a critical classroom, the teacher does not fill students unilaterally with information but rather encourages them to reflect mutually on the meaning of any subject before them. Such a classroom integrates structured knowledge into the students' speech and understanding... Hopefully students will experience education as something *they* do, rather than something that is done to them... For critical and active learning, a ... concept is central to problem posing: dialogue... Empowering education as I present it here is a dialogic pedagogy. Mutual discussion is the heart of the method. Dialogue is simultaneously structured and creative. (85)

Further, Peter Elbow proposes in *Writing Without Teachers* that the peer writing group allows one to experience writing as "a transaction with other people," making the classroom a place to "do more business with other people... [where you get] a directly perceived sense of how different people react to the sounds you make" (76). And Mary Rose O'Reilley sees dialogue as a central component of the peaceable classroom: "class discussion is also vital to the dialogue between inner life and outer world. It is important that everyone in the class should talk so that discussion is not dominated by the merely extroverted" (33). Furthermore, the work of scholars who study race, gender, and class help us to understand the importance of creating academic spaces that foster dialogue and move students "beyond" silence.

Thus, for many composition teachers, dialogue has become both the metaphor for what we try to do in our classrooms and the practice that helps us reach this end. And we share the assumption that mutual reflection must take place through verbal utterance. But while much of the scholarship in our field celebrates student-centered learning, little work has been done to help us understand students' perspectives on speaking and silence in the classroom. So it is perhaps unsurprising that my professor, my colleagues, and I face so many challenges in implementing pedagogies of dialogue. The mismatch between our goals and our

students' behaviors suggested that we need to think more carefully about the decisions students themselves make. With this in mind, I designed a study to explore students' perceptions of speaking and silence.

Exploring Further: Study Design and Goals

I began an extended study of student silence with my first-year College Writing students after conducting smaller-scale studies with junior-year education majors as well as first-year composition students to explore the feasibility of a study about classroom silence as well as a variety of data-collection methods including observation, interviews, and self-reflections. These pilot studies suggested that students did indeed have much to say about their experiences of the classroom and the decisions they make about when and how they participate in classroom discussions. This two-year naturalistic study explored students' perceptions and constructions of speaking and silence in the classroom.

The study was designed to elicit the range of students' responses within a single classroom. As part of their journal requirement, all students were asked periodically to narrate and analyze moments of silence in the classroom— their own silences or those of their classmates. (See Appendix I for the prompts students were given). In their final reflections, students were asked to reflect upon the trends they observed and how these separate events might fit into any larger contexts. In this way, students explored what happened and how they reacted, and tried to make sense of how these particular moments fit into a broader perspective. Thus, the goal of the study was to see how students understood their experiences and to explore what those insights suggest about the classroom (Fishman & McCarthy 14). These written reflections became part of my research data.

Students' reflections were kept private until the semester was over, when students were able to renegotiate their participation in the study (Anderson 75). At the end of the semester, I asked for interview participants. From the nineteen volunteers, I selected five focal students who represented the range of responses in the

written reflections. I deliberately chose students who identified themselves as "quiet students," rather than relying on any labels I might have employed. (See Appendix II for more details).

Adapting Irving Seidman's technique of phenomenological interviewing (*Interviewing as Qualitative Research*), I conducted a set of three open-ended interviews with three women and two men. Their responses were coded holistically using inductive analysis to see the patterns, themes, and issues that the students themselves saw as important, rather than imposing my own categories and criteria (Patton 390). In doing so, I hoped to move beyond my teacher- and researcher-centered perspectives to understand the dynamics of speaking and silence in a new way. My analysis and identification of the "indigenous concepts" students brought to this topic initially took place through case studies. Ultimately, however, I found that cross-case analysis offered me a more complicated understanding of what D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly call the "outward" dimension of "personal experience methods" (147)— the classroom contexts in which students make decisions to speak or be silent. (See Appendix III for more detail about data collection and analysis).

The study was undertaken for several purposes, the first of which was to understand the students' perspectives on silence. I began my investigation with the assumption that a student's silence in the classroom is not merely (and not necessarily) a sign of lack, absence, or being silenced. The data generated, then, offered me a new way to explore these questions:

- Why do students choose to be silent, particularly when many of their teachers value dialogue as a means of learning?
- Does students' silence indicate resistance to teachers' demands and expectations?
- How do students understand this highly-charged dynamic of speaking and silence in a classroom?

When I talk about this research with quiet students, people often ask, "What do I do about/ with/ for the silent students in my class?" Initially, this was a question I dreaded. This question seemed to oversimplify what I was coming to see as a complicated, multi-layered dynamic into a discrete "problem" that could easily be fixed by some teacherly sleight-of-hand. And I resisted the implication that my research should reveal how we might encourage, coerce, trick these problem students into complying with *what we know is good for them*, even if it makes them uncomfortable, even if they don't experience it as developing their thinking. Further, my experiences as a teacher, a researcher, and a quiet student suggest there are no easy answers, no one-size-fits-all approach for all teachers and all students.

Through the consideration of the rich and varied stories my students told in the course of this study, I have begun to think more carefully about *how* I elicit the voices of my students. That is, I began to think about how these new understandings of students' decisions to speak or be silent might translate into practical knowledge. How might my practices be better informed by students' concerns? How can I meet my goals for dialogue and collaborative learning while taking into account those issues quiet students negotiate in the composition classroom?

What follows is an evolving set of principles that result from the work I did with these so-called "quiet students." These are strategies-in-process: I suspect that over time these will (and should) change as a result of my exposure to an even larger pool of quiet students and the experience of working with them. I offer them deliberately in the first-person; these are not prescriptions for other teachers. Rather, these strategies are part of a larger pedagogy, my own identity as a teacher, and the values I hold about teaching and learning.

Putting into Practice What I've Learned: Considerations and Strategies for the Classroom

In light of the stories and reflections shared by the students in my study:

1. *I must remain self-consciousness about what I'm asking students to do.* For many students, the conversations in college classrooms can feel like a new language, with complex and confusing rules guiding interaction. Depending on their educational backgrounds and expectations about schooling, it may take students time, practice, and explicit direction to adapt to the culture of a collaborative learning environment.

   My requests for oral participation seem transparent. To me. For example, I frequently begin with questions to elicit response and reaction, scaffolding discussion "upwards" towards higher-level cognitive tasks of analysis and interpretation. These early questions (What stood out to you in the essay? What did this make you think about? How did you react to the ideas presented?) seem "easy" to me, giving all students an accessible way to connect to the material and a relatively low-stakes means of having one's voice heard. Likewise, I think this approach emphasizes that there are multiple means of responding to a text. My hope is that the confidence and sense of shared purpose built from such discussions will encourage students to think of the classroom as, if not a "safe" space, a safe-enough space to voice an interpretation.

   But it doesn't always work this way: students don't necessarily understand the rules guiding this kind of classroom conversation. Catarina recalled that she was initially confused by the kinds of questions I asked, in part because they contradicted her expectations about "what teachers want." She said:

[In] high school, the teacher ... lectured and then the class was over. Um, getting used to discussion [in college classes] was very different. Very weird. Because I'm not, I wasn't used—at all—to teachers expecting you to talk. I was kind of used to sitting there and you know, just staying still for an hour.... They drew a very strict line between participating in class and acting out... We had fifty-minute classes and the teacher would spend maybe five minutes at the end of class asking... questions. But it was never something where you were expected to say, "Well you know, I think this." It was just "know what the teacher wants to know and say it."

Adding to her confusion was the difficulty she faced in her other classes, large lectures with minimal opportunity for students to speak, and the challenge of "translating" between the expected behaviors in different classrooms. Feeling like a stranger in a strange land, she struggled without guidance from her teachers. Compounding this sense of dislocation was her perception that other students already knew how to negotiate these unspoken rules effortlessly, a perception that made her even less likely to speak up.

Catarina's story hints at the complexity of the task we pose to our students. For those who have internalized the "rules" as she had (that to speak is to risk evaluation and that one should, as closely as possible, approximate what the teacher wants to hear), the relative fluidity and flexibility of dialogue in collaborative learning may seem threatening, disorienting. And to have a focus of the discussion be one's own writing can exponentially increase this discomfort. Rather than feeling empowering as we teachers might hope, these practices may seem inexplicable, even dangerous.

For many of the students in this study like Catarina, the composition classroom was something of an anomaly: the

teacher positioned herself differently in relation to knowledge and authority with a consequent change in the roles for students. They needed to learn a "new language," as the rules for interaction and for being a good student were quite different from what they had come to expect. Without guidance from their teachers, how do Catarina and her classmates know if they are doing, saying the "right thing"?

2. This engenders another principle. *I must find more ways, and more persuasive ways, to emphasize that students' voices really do matter in my classroom.* It is not enough for me to say that "oral participation is required." Just as students may need more guidance to understand that the rules and goals of my classroom are different, they may need more explicit directions about *how* one participates in this kind of classroom.

I have begun to see the type of teacher-led discussions I grew so comfortable with as a student and a teacher do not always emphasize the value of individual students' voices. Frequently students in this study spoke of a teacher's questions having a "right" answer, even if she professes to value multiple interpretations. As Edward argued, these teacher-led discussions can feel "almost like a script. Like she knows where she wants... to go with this. [She has] a map." In this way, students' voices are essentially interchangeable, a means to a pre-determined goal.

Sometimes, that model does fit my goals; for example a class on the mechanics of documentation has a quantifiable, "right" end. But more frequently, I see the process—of articulating, questioning, and constructing our interpretations—as the objective of a class discussion. With this in mind, I have been experimenting more deliberately with ways to take myself out of the center of the classroom when it is appropriate and possible to do so. Some of these practices include:

- *Using peer feedback more extensively.* Initially, I saw peer feedback as a supplement to teacher feedback, an extra way for students to get more information about drafts, and I realize now I unconsciously presented it this way to my students. What I began to see was that my feedback was always taken more seriously than that of students—*what I said was what really mattered*—and students' feedback could be ignored. Peer feedback came to be seen as a mere exercise rather than as an important way to test out one's ideas. To help students see their peers as a critical source of information about their essays, sometimes I will not respond to drafts, asking students to rely on their peers' feedback in revising an essay. Thus, writers are forced to be more explicit about their goals for a particular piece, and peer-responders become accountable for giving thoughtful, useful feedback. In doing so, I believe students come to see their classmates as "real readers" and their writing as a more genuine form of communication.

- I am also interested in the ways that students might be asked to take a more active role in shaping the classroom. For example, my writing classes typically begin with journal-writing; *I ask students to bring in writing prompts.* In any given class, these prompts may include quotes and passages students find meaningful, photographs, artwork, personal artifacts, music, and thought-provoking questions. While this is a relatively small piece of the class, it does give students an important investment in the class. Some students in my study said they initially found this practice anxiety-producing, but ultimately gained confidence because it gave a specific (and

predictable) space in which to speak. And because students were encouraged to mine their journals for essay ideas, they saw their prompts could have a significant effect on their classmates.

- I have adapted this practice in other classes as well. For example, in literature-based classes, *we often use questions from students' reading journals to guide our discussion of texts.* In my experience, students generally pose smart, insightful questions that lead us to important issues in the texts. But these discussions are qualitatively different from the ones I lead. Rather than trying to get the "right answer" to my questions, students work together to understand the text and address each other's concerns. (Donald Finkel's *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* provides a much fuller discussion of such practices.) And if all students are asked to contribute at least one question, each student has a chance to shape the conversation.

- *Asking each student to offer one insight, question, or response at the beginning of a discussion* reinforces the importance of hearing the range of students' perspectives. This practice can be time-consuming, but I believe it is valuable, particularly with controversial topics that may provoke a heated debate between highly vocal students. In his written reflection, Brad talked specifically about this activity, commenting that it demonstrated "the difference between being *taught at* and actually being included in the class." And Jenna, surprised at her silences in her college classes, analyzed the practice this way:

  When it was my turn to state my views, I really felt an urge to explain my own opinion, and try to let others know where I was coming from...

I was actually excited to tell people [what I thought]... Even after my turn was over, I found myself [wanting to] call...out comments to others... as they explained their views. After class, I felt very satisfied that I had the chance to explain what I thought- even if the others don't remember what I had said.

Perhaps what distinguishes this practice from other strategies like calling on students is the perception of fairness: all students are included and no one is singled out. Further, students have some control over what they say (and when they say it), so this enforced "participation" doesn't feel like an oral exam.

- I have also experimented with *student-generated essay prompts.* The class negotiates a single topic that all students will write on; I do not participate in the decision-making process. I find this works best near the end of the semester when students have a clear sense of the expectations of the course and are more experienced in working collaboratively. While these essay prompts are generally not ones that I would have chosen, they often produce some of the strongest essays in the course. Furthermore, the conversations that lead to their final decision allow students to revisit their definitions of "good writing," and they have greater investment in reading the work of their peers.

- And there are other possibilities: *group presentations, student-taught grammar lessons, negotiating the texts to be read in class, etc.* In designing such practices, I must keep in mind the overall goals of valuing what students bring to the conversation and allowing them some sense of control over the process of sharing

their voices. If these measures become yet more opportunities for feeling tested or "put on the spot," they may, in fact, do more harm than good.

3. *It is important to vary the means of eliciting students' voices.* The students in my study expressed their preferences for one forum (pairs, small groups, large groups, student-led discussions, written discussion, etc.) over others, seeing this in terms of "comfort." Sarah explained:

> I think people are way more talkative when they are in smaller groups rather than a larger group such as the whole class. For obvious reasons. It is just a lot easier speaking in front of three people rather than twenty-five. I really like how we break into smaller groups. I don't mind reading my draft to two other people. But I would feel uncomfortable reading it in front of the whole class, especially since everyone is watching [you] and listening to your every word.

Even more important than students' sense of comfort is their understanding of the work that can be done in these different configurations. Typically, students saw full class discussion as debates and performances of knowledge for the audience of classmates and, more importantly, the teacher, while they believed smaller groups served very different goals. Students said they were more likely to ask questions and propose alternative interpretations because the more controlled forum of small groups offered an opportunity to negotiate meaning, to challenge themselves and others, and to seek "synthesis and a combination of what everybody thinks."

Finally, students argued that different classroom configurations allow them to take on different roles. For

example, several quiet students said they enjoyed "more active" roles in smaller groups, not simply speaking more frequently but taking on more directive roles to guide the conversations in these groups.

Does this suggest abandoning full-class discussions? Not necessarily. But it does lead me to acknowledge how difficult it may be to persuade my students to re-evaluate the purpose of such interactions. And these constructions help me to understand the sometimes-surprising hesitations and challenges of full-class discussions. These reflections also suggest ways to design classroom practices to capitalize on these understandings of knowledge and meaning-making. Getting dialogue "working" means more than asking good questions; it also requires skillfully managing the context.

4. **I have come to see that it is important to** *publicly recognize students' contributions to classroom discussions*. While nearly all the students in my study were able to identify teachers' behaviors that stifled classroom conversation or limited their voices, few could point to any significant positive encouragement. For example, Sarah remembers one occasion when she was told she had a "good answer"-- the greatest validation she had received. In light of this, I have been working harder to acknowledge students' voices. Rather than reflexively evaluating or praising students' contributions (which I suspect they quickly learn to mistrust), I try to let students' comments propel our discussion. This may involve distilling out a question, re-presenting a student's ideas in a way that invites response, or asking students to frame their contributions in terms of a previous one. It also means I have to be fairly flexible in following students' leads while remaining attentive to my own goals. But it is worth the effort: what greater acknowledgement is there than to see one's contributions to a conversation *matter?*

5. *I have to remember that, despite what Hollywood tells us, good conversations rarely happen between strangers.* For many students, college provided their first experiences in classrooms with 20, 40, even 200 people they did not know, often prompting an atypical unwillingness to talk in class. Julia, a highly vocal student, offered this insight: "The first time I speak up and say something is usually the hardest because I'm not sure how the class or the teacher will react. After that, if the situation wasn't too traumatizing, I'm more able to ask questions and discuss things." And while Julia found she could usually "just speak up," many students said they needed more time to trust that their classmates would listen carefully and respectfully. Said Kurt, "I think now that I know people better than I did before... it makes me a little more comfortable reading something I wrote than before. Which is certainly a good thing. I think I get more out of the class when I participate more in it... as soon as they're comfortable with their surroundings they are more apt to share, because if you don't know who you're dealing with, you don't know what to expect."

And Jodie, who had cancer, told this story:

> Throughout most of my life I have been quiet when it comes to talking during to class. I really don't know why because I love to talk. I guess just not around people that I am not close with. One day though, I noticed an extreme change. How... the class got on the subject about cancer I don't remember, but it was just before class started and we began to talk about it. They ... ask[ed] me questions and I had no problem answering them.
>
> That led me to write a paper about it. When we split up into small groups discussing one another's drafts I noticed myself voicing what I really felt. I

was able to [tell my] two partners what I really thought of their drafts...

Jodie's reflections suggest how transformative a sense of comfort and connection can be. I want to be clear here: I'm not aiming to create friendships or to get students to "like" each other. But I can work to foster productive working relationships that transcend coincidental enrollment in the same section of College Writing. I believe this is particularly important in introductory classes, where students are most likely to be struggling with their sense of identity and how they "fit" in college.

Here, then, is a list of the practices the students in my study found helpful in developing a sense of mutual respect and shared purpose:

- "Interviews" on the first day of class (students paired up to interview a classmate; each then introduced her partner to the rest of the class)
- Learning (and being quizzed on) classmates' names
- Lower-stakes collaborations early in the semester
- Rotating partners for early small group work
- Eventually being able to choose partners with whom they work productively, particularly for peer feedback
- Hearing what other students were writing about or how they were approaching a new project

Ultimately, as Allison argued, "The tone should be of mutual respect, between students and the teacher and the students with each other." And as the teacher, I can do something about that.

6. *I must untangle my preconception that vocal students are "good" students and quiet students are not.* Julia and Sarah were two students about as different as possible, at least as far as their classroom interactions were concerned. My teaching journal reveals that Julia spoke frequently and at great length, often making the class laugh with an odd insight or question. Julia was generally one of the first to join a full-class discussion, prompting others' responses. Sarah, on the other hand, seldom—if ever—spoke voluntarily. Julia could be relied on to engage others; Sarah seemed most content on the days she was able to maintain her silence.

In her first written reflection, Julia wrote:

> Usually I'm not very quiet. Once I start getting to know people... and feel more comfortable, I tend to talk more during class. Talking during class keeps me from getting bored and it also keeps me interested in what we're doing. If I don't talk during class then I get really bored and don't really listen a lot.

Julia's self-awareness about using speech as a focusing behavior seems quite sophisticated, but does this behavior make her a better student than "painfully quiet" Sarah, who took copious notes and frequently asked her peers and me follow-up questions after class? Outwardly, Julia looked far more compliant and more engaged than many of her peers. She *showed* her engagement, while Sarah's silences often felt like a sign of failure on her part or mine.

I contrast Julia's reflection to the stories Sarah told during her interviews. Sarah remembered, "I was kept back between kindergarten and first grade because I wasn't social enough... They were like 'trying to solve the problem' of us not speaking as much. They tried to, you know, buddy us up with someone." The problem continued: she

confronted teachers in high school about grades that didn't match her high marks on tests and essays, only to be told her "lack of participation" was reflected in her diminished average.

Such reflections make me reconsider a requirement for participation. Should a student like Sarah be punished for this perceived *lack*? In doing so, I doubt that she learns much about the value of speaking, except as a punitive measure. Can she learn to see oral participation as a useful learning tool in this way? These questions become more complicated when considering other indications of Sarah's engagement with the class. Her frequent additional drafts, difficult writing topics, and challenging rhetorical goals suggest she was, in fact, a conscientious student who listened intently to the ongoing classroom conversation. It's difficult to conclude, given this evidence, that Sarah's classroom silence had anything to do with a lack of motivation or an unwillingness to "participate."

One final point. Julia's writing improved little, if at all, throughout the semester. While she was fun and engaging in class, I wonder how much she actually learned. Sarah's writing, already impressive for a college freshman, improved significantly. And the thoughtful feedback she offered her peers bore witness to her engagement in the class. Is *that* participation?

I have come to see that my often-unarticulated assessments about what it means to participate in a class discussion may not adequately reflect the work of students like Julia, like Sarah. I have become far less comfortable with the idea that speaking reflects one's engagement or that "participation" can be measured in any easy way, if at all. While my grading criteria used to assign a percentage to "participation," with this evaluation often relating to a student's speaking, I am now trying to consider this component in relation to other measures of student learning. Further, I ask students to assess their own

classroom performance during the semester. These written reflections ask students to explicitly consider themselves in light of my pedagogy and offer me important information I can't otherwise obtain. While this is by no means a perfect system, it does keep me from reductive—and inaccurate—assessments.

7. *I must understand that students' labels and definitions may be very different from my own.* Nineteen of the twenty-four students in my study participated in a survey after the class was over. One question asked if they would label themselves as "quiet" students. I had expected this would confirm my suspicions with their self-assessments mirroring my evaluations. The results were startling: I would have labeled at least eight of the students significantly differently than they saw themselves.

This relatively large number of students seeing themselves so differently than I did troubles me, particularly since so many of them, in my view, had overestimated their contributions. I suspect many thought they were more than meeting my expectations. Where did this disjuncture in our perspectives come from? Did all these students radically misunderstand their contributions to classroom interactions? Did I let other preconceptions of these students color my interpretations? Did I apply unfair or uneven expectations?

Another possibility emerges: that both teacher and students were using an elusive scale, a subjective measurement that left our visions of the classroom in conflict with each other. Perhaps we just weren't using the same language to talk about what happened in the classroom, further complicated by the fact that in any given day, students see a range of teachers with widely divergent expectations about what it means to "participate" in a class.

Ultimately, there is no easy answer to this divergence in interpretation; I will never see the classroom exactly as my

students do. However, this mismatch in our assessments has highlighted how important it is for me to be aware of the judgments I make about students and the standards I can unconsciously apply. Further, I need to be explicit about what these expectations are *and why I have them*. But this should be a conversation, not a directive. I need to listen as well to what students can tell me about the classroom. Likewise, it is my responsibility to help students become more aware of the choices they are making about speaking and silence and how this may be affecting how they are perceived in the classroom.

8. ***It is crucial to remember that no single strategy works for all students all the time***. I was reminded of this recently when a colleague whom I greatly respect visited my class and offered thoughtful suggestions about my teaching. Some of his suggestions were, in fact, strategies I had tried earlier in the semester. Unfortunately they proved unsuccessful with this particular group of students.

In reviewing their written reflections and interview transcripts, I learned from the students in my study what they saw as productive in my teaching. And there were moments when I felt a bit smug: many valued the same things I did, came to value my approach to teaching and writing. Some students found peer feedback *useful* for the first time; others were engaged by the use of small groups. Many appreciated the intimacy fostered between students and with me.

Then I read Tracy's critique:

> In smaller classes, such as my English class, the teacher makes you sit in a circle and learn each other's names. If I wanted to know someone's name, I'd ask them. I want the teacher to teach, students listen, interact if they want to and learn. I feel as though in smaller classes, people usually get

to know one another but this does not mean that the idea of getting to know one another should be used during class. It takes me a while before I am really social with someone. When teachers make you work in groups… it just makes me not want to go the class. I sometimes dread English class because I hate groups so much.

Had I known this during the semester, I suspect I would have tried to get her to "fit" into my comfortable assessments about the class as her classmates did. But I would have missed the opportunity to explore and understand what she found so problematic. Tracy's reflections highlight for me the importance of listening to critique and inviting honest feedback, difficult as it may be to hear.

Likewise, her reflections help me to remember that what works for one class, for one student is no magic talisman. Her story reminds me of the need to respond to such challenges with flexibility and a willingness to experiment, not the sense that my approach "should work." Although it's tempting to blame Tracy for her discomfort or for being a "bad student" or to blame myself is unproductive, it's unfair to her and it robs me of the opportunity to become a better teacher.

9.   Perhaps the most important realization distilled for me from this research is this: *I should not mistake the practice of dialogue for its goal.*   There is a profound difference between getting students talking and facilitating genuine learning. Certainly collaborative learning and dialogue have proved, for many of us, to be a pedagogy that enacts our values. The work of Bakhtin, Bruffee, Freire, Shor, Elbow, O'Reilley, and a host of other composition scholars too numerous to mention here explicates the transformative power of dialogue.   But it is equally

important to remember that verbal dialogue is only one of the ways to foster (and to measure) the reflection and critical thinking we value so highly.

For many of the students in this study (and I suspect for the students I see in my classes everyday), this larger purpose for dialogue can be obscured by the pressure to talk they feel from their teachers. When speaking in class simply provides another means of assessment, students are taught to see speaking and collaborative learning as a product, a performance, rather than as a dialectic, a generative process. So it is unsurprising to find students so overwhelmed by the pressure to speak that they lose track of the conversation, students who see class discussion as an empty exercise, and students who remain silent because they think teachers are just "looking for bullshit." When the pressure to talk results in these far-too-common assessments by students, we've mis-educated these students. Or perhaps they've learned their teachers' lessons too well.

Just as my literature professor did so many years ago, I often find myself focusing on the outward, visible manifestations of dialogic learning. Dialogue allows us to hear the sounds of our students thinking. But in our desire to embrace the promise of dialogue, we must not neglect the other forms of reflection, including writing and, yes, silence. I can count the number of students who talk, measure the pauses in the conversation. But that is not enough. In challenging the "truths" we teachers hold about dialogic learning, the students in this study have taught me to respect both the voices *and* the silences that create dialogue.

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Appendix I

This prompt was given to students for the first three journal reflections during Weeks 4, 8, 12:

> Choose a moment or event from the last few weeks of class that in some way involved class discussion or interaction. 1) <u>Please narrate this event, giving a sense of what happened and what it felt like for you</u>. (You might choose a moment when you were quiet, whether or not that's typical for you; a moment when you found yourself talking, even if you tend to see yourself as a quiet student; a moment when you were struck by another student's behavior or decision to speak or not; or something else...? 2) <u>Reflect on these questions</u>: why did you choose this particular incident? Why is it striking to you?

In the final reflection, students were asked to put these reflections in a larger context, with the more analytical questions:

- In thinking about the three reflections that you wrote for my research, are there any patterns you notice (about the types of stories you told, about your reactions, etc.)?
- When you think about the issues of speaking or silence in any classrooms, what generalizations can you draw?
- What questions or issues do you think I should consider when I write about this? When I teach?
- Has thinking about this issue changed how you respond in classes or how you feel about speaking or silence in classes?

Appendix II

When I chose students to interview, I looked for those who expressed positions representative of the class as a whole, as characterized in the written reflections generated throughout the semester. That is, it seemed more important to me to understand the centers of gravity and points of intersection in these reflections, rather than to investigate the atypical and outlying responses. (So, for example, the single student who wrote exclusively and at great length about the days of the week or times of the day affecting his classroom behaviors was eliminated.) I also looked for students whose journal entries demonstrated an "average" quantity of both narration and analysis (in relation to their peers), in order to provide a depth of data during the second phase of my research. Finally, I wanted my interview subjects to represent as closely as possible the class and university demographic trends. (Ultimately, I interviewed three women and two men. One female student had moved to the United States from Israel two years before. One of the men was of Indian descent; the rest of the students identified themselves as "white" American citizens).

Appendix III

Interviews

Each student was interviewed individually, with all three 60-minute interviews scheduled within approximately one month's time. The interviews were taped, and I took notes after the interviews on salient themes as well. I reviewed my notes and listened to the tapes before subsequent interviews in order to ask any follow-up questions for clarification, amplification, etc. Two of Sarah's interviews were slightly shorter than the allotted time; several of the other interviews ran longer. In addition, 4 of the 5 students volunteered for additional interviews if I requested them. I connect this generosity to the same impulse that led one student to note on the bottom of his final reflection: "why has no teacher ever asked us about this [speaking and silence in classes] before?" Despite self-identifying as "quiet" students, these five focal students were not "quiet" interviewees. Subjectively, I found them incredibly eager to tell their stories, to consider the questions I posed, and to have their experiences, issues, and questions be taken seriously by a teacher.

During the first interview, I asked students to describe their experiences with oral class participation, including times they found it successful or unsuccessful, moments they recalled being vocal or silent, experiences of classroom speaking or silence that were particularly memorable for them. During the second interview, I shifted the interview focus from isolated experiences and moments and broadened the scope of questions to the

student's history including school, family, social contexts, etc. I had an Interview Guide (Patton 282), a broad list of questions I relied on in these interviews, but I did not ask each student each question in precisely the same order, as my objective was to investigate the issues and themes my students suggested were important; my questions were not predetermined, but were a response to the content of students' stories and reflections. I believe the students I interviewed are "sources of knowledge whose insights help focus and provide new directions for the study" (Ray 175). In the final interview, we followed up on the previous interviews, and I asked students to explore in more depth both the written accounts they produced and the interview transcripts. In doing so, I asked students to comment on their own narratives and to make sense for themselves of the themes, patterns, and concerns they saw emerging in these texts.

In this way, the interviews all followed a similar overarching structure but were not identical. For example, all students spoke in the second interview (at my prompting) about the role that speaking and silence play in their family, as well as any differences they see in their behaviors in and outside of school. However, one student, Lucy, spoke in all three interviews at length about a particularly painful experience she had in another class with being "put on the spot" after objecting to the content of a film being shown in class; Edward explored the various roles he saw himself inhabiting-- silent student in class, actor and drama student, comedian with his friends, only child; Katarina investigated the difficulties she faced in a classroom that forced herself into "dangerous" revelations through her writing. Some students told extended stories and reflections (most notably Lucy and Edward), while others seemed most comfortable with a more traditional question-and-answer format.

One of the limitations of such an approach is that it does not provide neatly comparable data: it is not easy (or I dare say, possible) to explain why Sarah's silences feel so much more impenetrable, even more painful than Lucy's, why Edward's self-professed identity as a "quiet student" doesn't match how I'd label him at all. I don't have anything I can clearly chart out, anything I can count, anything I can usefully quantify. The structure of my research design doesn't allow for that kind of interpretation. If I had followed a different kind of interview format, I might have it. But I'd be missing something equally—if not more—important had I not followed where students led me and investigated the issues and concerns they conceived of as shaping their decisions to speak or be silent in classrooms.

Data Analysis

With the written reflections produced during the semester and the interview transcripts, I conducted inductive analysis to explore the themes and patterns that emerged. While I certainly approached the study with

preconceptions about the reasons for student silence (particularly in light of my reading of composition theory and scholarship on gender, race, and class), I was committed to exploring and understanding the frameworks that students use to understand their own behaviors and experiences. My coding and analysis began with what Patton calls indigenous concepts (390), those terms that participants use. In my initial reading, by looking at the kinds of issues my students talked about and the terms that surfaced frequently, I could begin to identify themes and trends. For example, "teachers" and "students" were major— and obvious—categories that appeared in almost every student's reflections. Others were more difficult to label so neatly; ultimately, I had nine major categories. [1]

In a subsequent reading, I then looked for micro-themes in each of these categories and created memos for each theme and student, in preparation for cross-case analysis. In this way, I was able to see where students' reflections clustered and diverged, illuminating important variables within a particular category.

I do acknowledge here that these labels are not "pure" and unquestionable themes that emerge spontaneously from the data of students' reflections; as a researcher, I undoubtedly shape the data through my reading of them. I suspect, as well, that my relationship to these students built over a semester of teaching and the subsequent weeks of interviewing them inflects my interpretation of these reflections as well; another researcher might very well see a different set of categories. However, I do argue that there is value in a commitment to this approach, beyond a philosophical commitment or a particular approach to research.

One brief example to illustrate why using indigenous concepts is valuable. The "categories" I would likely have brought to this research, given my experiences as a teacher and my reading in composition theory as well as in scholarship about race, class, and gender, would likely have included terms such as resistance, hostility, passivity, difference, absence/lack.

Now, look at this excerpt from Laura's first reflection:

> ...after everyone discussed their answers to "Seeing Yourself as a Writer" when the class talked about the similarities and differences between our responses. Everyone group took a turn discussing and telling the larger group what they found out. When it came time for my group to speak I was hesitant at first, but then I jumped right into the conversation. In a classroom setting I am usually vocal when I feel comfortable with the group in the class...The only reason I usually don't speak during class is if I feel intimidated by the situation, whether by the teacher, students, or subject. When I'm in an environment where I feel I can be myself it's a lot easier for me to open up.

I think I chose this particular incident because it helped show who is more prone to open up and who isn't. When each group took their turn it was clear that there was usually one dominant speaker per group who would explain what they talked about. Every once in a while someone else would chime with a comment, but most of the talking came from the same person.

The frameworks I might have used to approach Laura's reflections seem inadequate (or at least significantly limited), particularly when her concerns are contextualized within her class's reflections. First, she notes no absence in her peers' silence, rather a choice of "opening up" or not, dominant speakers and other participants. Many of the concerns Laura alludes to—anxieties about her "comfort" with the subject or her classmates or the teacher—were mirrored in the reflections of her classmates, males and females alike. (So it becomes difficult to see this as a silence of difference either.) And it's hard to read in resistance, hostility, or apathy in her words as she described her peers, although their outward behaviors might certainly have indicated that to me, an outside reader of the complex group dynamics and negotiations she simply understands as classroom norms.

Notes

[1] These are: "comfort" with students, "comfort" with teachers, subject, classroom practices, environmental factors, "internal" reasons, alternate constructions, difference, "other" (i.e. isolated terms and concepts that seemed unconnected to other concepts.)