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## SHUTTING UP IN CLASS: THE ZEN OF SILENCE

BY DOUG THIELE

Ever since I can remember, I've had the ability to play fast and loose with spoken English. I suppose I attained the facility from my gabby ancestors and all those free-ranging family discussions at the dinner table, where even the young had to hold their own.

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*“The more I shut up,  
the more education  
took place.”*

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When I began my teaching career I used this skill constantly. Fortunately, in most cases my lectures were backed up by a moderate competence in the subject matter at hand, and on those few occasions when I found myself unprepared for a lesson, my fast mouth would invariably save me. My students would be sucked in as I held forth on issues only tangentially connected to the topic at hand, and in my efforts to present the “bigger picture” to them, I was entertaining and almost always successful in helping the time pass. I even thought this practice was admirable. Though I had been taught that teachers who “stand and deliver” diminish the value of the interactive classroom, the students didn't seem to mind; they liked me.

My views on verbiage worship took an unexpected turn when I had the opportunity to teach avant-garde classes at a Summer Governor's School program at the University of Richmond. We team-taught gifted high school students, the best from each school in Virginia, on interdisciplinary subjects such as *Cities In the Arts*, or *Fire and Ice*, or even the Post-Modern “*Blue*,” in which we studied everything from Picasso's Blue Period to The Blues. The students had each been accustomed to their local best-in-class status until they were thrown into a setting in which every other student was also a prime mover and shaker. The dynamics were fascinating.

At first it seemed to be a perfect environment for a fast-mouthed teacher. Receptive students were ready to soak up my broad, sometimes trivial knowledge of many issues, and, being a reasonably congenial person, things seemed at first to be working out very well. We were all entertained, and the occasional debates were diverting.

We lived on campus for the month of teaching, and in one of many late-night accidental faculty meetings in the dorm hall, we started discussing effective teaching tools. One teacher, who had been significantly silent during the discussion, was asked her opinion. Without hesitation, she said that her most effective tool was silence – not the pregnant pause designed to intimidate the unruly, not the uneasy truce between teacher and student, but the healthy, opportunity-rich lack of words.

As a musician, I am familiar with the works of the great composer-experimenter, John Cage, especially his work *4:33*, in which a pianist strolls on stage with a stop watch, sits at the piano, and doesn't play a note for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The piece is almost always met with giggles and grins, as if Cage had gotten away with something, and we were all rubes for having been taken in. But behind the show were deeper issues: rests are just as musical as notes; silence is a dynamic; and then, from the wider view, the window is only valuable for the nothing it delineates. It turns out that the concept of the necessity of opposites is alive and well in John Cage's philosophy. It is a silence that draws out – exactly what real education is supposed to do.

Now there was an opportunity to explore this concept in the classroom, and when I did, I was truly amazed at the results. It was seriously frightening at first. Silence is a powerful noise, even a few seconds worth. I launched my first experiments into true silence with some hesitation. But what happened was dramatically rewarding. The students began to fill in the silence with wonderful ideas, points of view and flights of delicious fancy. They began to own their class in all the important ways students can. The more I shut up, the more education took place. This seems even more relevant in an age in which machines spit out all the factoids anyone would ever want, making the teacher's dim recitation of data redundant.

Before one class, my co-teacher and I decided to keep our academic code of silence from the very beginning of class, and not break it at all. The students said "Good morning," and we nodded and smiled. It is true that body language and gesture are, indeed, language, but these encourage comment, they don't step on it. The class was excruciating for us, but the results were more positive than we could have hoped for. The students were the class and the lessons came from a community of learners.

At first, it was a little disturbing for me to think that what I had assumed I was best at was really not very instrumental in class, and could even be counterproductive. I suppose I was a little chagrined that I had spent all that time doing what my students could have been doing for themselves, and with more comprehensive results. But as I got better with my *silence management*, I learned that all I really needed was a light hand on the tiller, and a couple of fingers over my mouth when things got really tempting. The dynamics of the classroom took on a kind of glow that came from allowing every voice a real opportunity to be heard. I began to realize that in my previous efforts at handing out knowledge, and inspiration, and wisdom, I had relegated those qualities in my students to a back seat. It was like I had been asking a perpetually rhetorical question, guiding my students down the narrow stream of my own ideas, without allowing all of us to explore the wider waters of our collective making. I found that as long as students were prepared for it, they discovered just about every single issue I wanted to address, and usually brought other ideas to the table which I hadn't even considered.

At first I worried that this process would only work in the gifted-student arena, because these were students who, for better or worse, were “front-row” movers and shakers, who routinely presented themselves to the classroom. But my experience now is that all students respond positively when their opinions and ideas are given proper light.

When I began my community college career I learned quickly to value the diversity of our student profiles. I came to appreciate the wary but intrigued posture that young and older students carried into the class. I supposed that many of these students had good reason not to volunteer information in my class, either because they had often been left out of their high school class activities, or because they had not been in class for years. But now, the “grown-up” school rules were different. My students often juggled at least one job and had children, along with their own ambitions, and so I worried that they had given up on volunteering opinions, and would not take on the task. But I had grown accustomed to whipping up a creative silence whenever I could, and I had just as much respect for the community college learning experience as in other schools, and in some cases, more. I was wrong to worry. The opportunity to have their opinion heard and truly valued was too tempting. Sometimes I felt like the conductor in the caboose of a runaway train, but I restrained myself, and only jumped in when the conversation got a little *ad hominem*, or seriously off-track. Not only were my students every bit as willing to break my silence, but the diversity of their backgrounds, their individual points of view, and their commonalities became the locomotive that drove the verbal classroom, creating an even deeper and wider conversation. The icing on the cake was that giving students more voice by shutting up in class became mutually infectious.

Of course, like any process, it does not always work. Sometimes students are ill-equipped to take the academic ball and run with it, and sometimes I have not prepared them carefully enough. Not all students trust the process, having been mauled in past excursions into speaking out, but in the majority of cases, students are up to the task, and the result of their input is that they really begin to invest in the process and, more encouraging, come to expect it. The class is theirs as much as it is mine, and they get a glimpse into what true learning can entail.

I feel fortunate that, as an English instructor, I am tasked to teach critical thinking and cultural literacy, but if we teach courses that apply to the real world, then the classroom conversation will be a valuable, if not essential tool in most disciplines.

All of this requires that we trust our students when we put our pontificating egos in the back seat, but the rewards are palpable. I am no longer afraid that my students will drift off with my constant drone. They’re too busy talking.

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