

Silence in Academia

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Abstract

For academic learning to be truly transformative it must connect with intimate personal experience and one of the important ways that this can take place is through silent contemplation. Unfortunately it seems that the significance of silence has been largely ignored in the current academic context with a growing emphasis on the efficient delivery of information. At Brighton University some colleagues and I decided to run a series of silence sessions to assess the current significance of silence in this context. Here I report on the background to these sessions and what we discovered from experiencing silence together in a modern university.

Key Words: Silence, academia, learning, teaching, context, contemplation, pedagogy.

1. Silence and Learning

Learning is not just about the accumulation of knowledge in the form of words, ideas, skills or concepts¹. For learning to be meaningful and truly transformative it has to relate in some way to the experience of individual lives and silent contemplation can allow this connection to personal experience to emerge as part of the learning process. An academic environment seeking to encourage meaningful learning should acknowledge and support this by providing internal space for reflection and the acquisition of more considered and critical perspectives. Indeed opportunities for silence can allow shifts towards ways of knowing that go beyond words.²

At an everyday institutional level universities do seem to signal the importance of silence by providing silent study areas in libraries, expecting students to remain silent during lectures and adorning doorways during exam time with the ubiquitous notice: SILENCE PLEASE EXAM IN PROGRESS. In these ways academia acknowledges silence as part of receiving and making sense of new knowledge. By providing space for thought it can help students to integrate new ideas into their existing world view and provide opportunities for them to challenge internally the veracity and validity of new concepts. However these ‘silent practices’ are not only the habitual expectations of academic institutions but also maintain an instrumental view of silence as a mere facilitator of thought – the significance of silence itself remains largely unexamined by students and tutors alike. In this chapter I would like to suggest that silence can also have value in and of itself not just as an opportunity to think but as an appropriate response or way of being within a learning and teaching situation.

In learning situations where tutors and students meet, silence is often difficult to interpret and navigate with a high degree of awkwardness and anxiety coming from students and sometimes tutors as well. Silence can indicate many things that have little to do with learning as the acquisition of knowledge³ and more to do with the immediate context of learning. Silence may indicate boredom, disinterest, a lack of confidence in public speaking or not wanting to appear ignorant in front of one's peers. It can even be that students are unfamiliar with the notion of taking time to think through academic dilemmas or to question the assumptions of knowledge suffering from an 'over-respect' for academic ideas. The ability to hold such silent spaces is important for tutors if we are to allow students opportunities to experience their learning as something which can go beyond the cognitive acquisition of knowledge⁴ and become something of significance for their own lives and those of others. The significance of silence is perhaps most obvious in situations of direct contact between students and university tutors but is also a significant aspect of universities' other roles particularly with regards to research and pastoral care.

Despite the apparent value of silence to university education, opportunities for sharing silence in this context have receded in recent times. In UK universities there are increasing numbers of students nationwide and course content is becoming oriented towards mass delivery using online tools such as virtual learning environments. More learning inevitably takes place in students' homes and online where distraction is an ongoing threat to learning. Opportunities for silence on university campuses are also compromised by the pervasive use of mobile phones and the declining role of libraries as a focal point for individual study. At the same time students appear to be taking a more instrumental approach to their learning⁵ emphasising grades as achievement rather than developing any deeper approach to learning which might require a more contemplative approach. This emerging relationship between universities and their students, risks emphasising the transmission of knowledge at the expense of contemplative spaces, leading to an educational environment where silence is neither acknowledged nor sought after. Silence itself has rarely been a focus for academic research into learning and teaching (with some exceptions⁶) so here I attempt to address this neglect.

2. The Silence Sessions

At the University of Brighton we were interested in exploring the meaning and significance of silence in our own academic context. We decided to run some open-ended 'silence sessions' with teaching, research and administrative staff to explore its contemporary significance in our university and to consider what this might mean for university life and pedagogy. We explored 'silence' experientially through a series of on-going silent meetings attended once a week with subsequent discussions about the experience and meaning of silence for our participants. The definition of 'silence' was deliberately left unqualified so that each participant could interpret this as they wished. Some read a book, some sat and looked out the window, others

engaged in their own meditation practice or Alexander technique⁷ (a method for gaining awareness of one's own habitual tensions whilst in particular physical postures; in this case the method involved lying on the floor with knees bent and eyes closed). The silence sessions started in November 2012 and are still ongoing. Since then over fifty participants have taken part with discussions taking place during the initial thirty four weeks. Here we report on the findings from these discussions reflecting upon: individual interpretations of silence from different participants; the benefits of regular periods of silence; the significance of sharing silence with others; the dynamics of a university context which can determine (or undermine) an appreciation of silence. Finally we consider how silence might be better incorporated into learning and teaching practices and as part of the mundane processes of university life, i.e. those activities which impact on the daily working lives of many university employees such as administrative tasks, meetings and other decision making activities.

3. The Meaning of Silence

Although participants were invited to sit in silence for twenty minutes it should not be assumed that this was something that was interpreted the same by each participant. The meaning of 'silence' was debated throughout the sessions. It was clear to participants that in this context silence was not merely the absence of external noise. There were various sounds that invaded the room from institutional sounds like students talking, doors opening and closing and tutors lecturing in adjacent rooms; natural sounds like birds singing, wind and rain outside as well as mechanical noise from nearby traffic.

'Silence and stillness go together' Pam, University Researcher.

It was suggested that the term 'silence' might be better described in terms of an inner silence that was available irrespective of external noise. This was seen by many as synonymous with a certain stillness which could only be achieved by removing oneself from the physical and social obligations of university life. Clearly these sessions provided an opportunity to explore this inner silence through stillness. As already mentioned participants chose to explore the silence sessions in different ways. Some took the unhindered opportunity to read a book whilst others sat with their own thoughts, enjoying the freedom to think about things that they would not normally take time to think about in a university environment. At times people sat with their eyes open, looking out of the window or more often they would close their eyes to remove the social cues that might interrupt another's silence. The majority of participants engaged in some form of meditation or mindfulness practice that they had learnt previously and were at ease with the twenty minutes of silence. There were also a couple of participants who expressed some distrust and unease over such an 'enforced' period of silence, feeling this to be quite oppressive. These anxieties

reduced over subsequent sessions but acted as an important reminder of the sometimes threatening nature of silence.

4. Sharing Silence with Others

Perhaps more significant than the individual experience of silence was the experience of sharing silence with others. All participants commented on this being an opportunity that they appreciated being available within the university. Meeting in this way was experienced as a supportive act which gave one another permission to engage in silence as an acceptable and meaningful practice. Participants said that meeting in silence in this way provided them with an opportunity to connect with work colleagues in a different way, allowing them to appreciate them in terms of their presence rather than just their work roles. It was felt that silence was not generally viewed in this way at the University and felt difficult to justify on an individual basis, feeling that it would generally be perceived as an unproductive thing to do.

Within the meetings themselves there was a general ethic towards allowing one another to appreciate silence in terms of stillness and an inner silence. Although this was never stated explicitly as a prerequisite for the sessions it seemed that participants still felt a pressure to abide by some 'norm' of silent behaviour. They tended not to move around the room and would avoid eye contact if they had their eyes open. Some experienced the group silence as both a personal and shared experience with value for the individual and the group.

5. The Value of Silence

Subsequent conversations often turned to the immediate and prolonged value of silence both during and after the sessions. The immediate silence served to increase awareness of environmental and personal 'noise' and increased the capacity for listening. Participants became more aware of the sounds of the academy: the constant buzz of conversations emanating from distant teaching rooms and the seemingly trivial chit chat of students out of class; sometimes intrusive but often just sound. Beyond this there were the sounds of nature and distant traffic noise which often remained unheard in a regular day at the university but which now became present. The capacity to listen was also turned inward during silence to often reveal noisy and busy minds, still thinking about academic ideas, sorting out lesson plans, research or administrative tasks even though such thoughts were currently unrequired and unproductive. Listening to such thoughts did bring about a quietening of the mind for some but even without this there was certainly a clarification of one's own mental noise as a factor in one's day. Listening was also a significant feature of the discussions that followed the silence sessions with participants allowing one another to completely finish what they had to say before starting to speak themselves and being more willing to leave silence as a valid part of the conversation.

The effects of silence also appeared to be experienced beyond the sessions with participants feeling that they were more productive in their own work immediately after. In addition some participants noted shifts in the ways that they related to others which they ascribed to regular periods of silence. One of these was being more patient with others through an increased ability to sit in silence and observe events rather than to intervene. The other was a greater appreciation of the significance of silence as a form of communication in its own right.

6. The Significance of Silence in an Academic Context

Our silence sessions have been appreciated by those that have attended and they are still taking place some three years on. Those that attend clearly see the value of silence in terms of their own wellbeing but also in relation to the university as a whole and the development of our students. From our experiences it seems that an appreciation of silence is important if we are to allow our students (and those that we work with) the opportunity to grow on a personal as well as an intellectual level as part of their learning process. Silence is a prerequisite for reflecting upon that which is being learnt whilst also providing opportunities for self-awareness that go far beyond the learning of content. A greater appreciation of silence within learning and teaching situations could encourage students to listen better to themselves and one another in ways that would support more meaningful learning experiences. For this kind of attitude to take hold in academia it would need to permeate all activities that we engage in with students and involve tutors, students, researchers as well as support staff and administrators. Many of our participants expressed real concerns about how or whether silence could ever be acknowledged as a significant principle in academic life. This was primarily because of the emphasis on words and thought-generated activity that characterises academia. It seems that the value of silence is likely to remain invisible in this context until it is articulated in an acceptable academic form.

It is also possible that the value of silence may be acknowledged more directly by changing certain aspects of university practice. For instance some of our participants suggested that periods of silence before institutional meetings could be an important precursor to discussions or decision-making processes. Similarly it seems important to develop students' (and tutors') ability to 'hold' silences within teaching and learning situations so that silence is appreciated not only as a time for reflection but also as a valid response to learning in itself.

Notes

¹ Jiddu Krishnamurti, *On Learning and Knowledge* (Krishnamurti Foundation Trust Ltd., 1994).

² Michalinos Zembylas and Pavlos Michaelides, 'The Sound of Silence in Pedagogy', *Educational Theory* 54.2 (2004): 193-210.

³ Huey-li Li, 'Silences and Silencing Silences', *Philosophy of Education Archive*, (2001): 157-165.

⁴ Carl Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* (Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1969).

⁵ Norman Brady, 'From "Moral Loss" to "Moral Reconstruction"? A Critique of Ethical Perspectives on Challenging the Neoliberal Hegemony in UK Universities in the 21st Century', *Oxford Review of Education* 38.3 (2012): 343-355.

⁶ David Kahane, 'Learning about Obligation, Compassion, and Global Justice: The Place of Contemplative Pedagogy', *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 118 (2009): 49-60; Rick Repetti, 'The Case for a Contemplative Philosophy of Education', *New Directions for Community Colleges* 151 (2010): 5-15.

⁷ F. M. Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, (E. P. Dutton & Co., 1923).

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