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SILENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

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One of the most unique opportunities afforded by the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr College is the opportunity to work with a student consultant. When I decided to join the TLI New Faculty Pedagogy Seminar, working with the student consultant was the aspect of the seminar that I looked forward to the most. I had expected to gain a new perspective on my classroom, learn about my teaching style through the eyes of an observer, and gain insight into the student culture at Bryn Mawr College. Ideally, I hoped to also develop a mentor relationship with my consultant by inviting her into the process of building a course and meeting the challenges of the classroom, looking for ways that we might mutually benefit from our partnership. While my work with the student consultant did yield numerous benefits, they were not quite what I had expected.

From the beginning of our partnership, I realized that my consultant's view of the ideal classroom differed from my own. I was indeed getting a new perspective, but I wasn't sure how well the consultant's perspective mirrored the experience and expectations of other students in my classroom. As a student of education, my consultant was bursting with ideas for how to run a classroom. The ideal classroom that she described involved a spirited and free-flowing discussion, punctuated by activities that further fuelled student engagement. My classroom, in contrast, was punctuated by periods of silence as my students struggled to digest difficult material before offering a contribution to the discussion. How to interpret these silences and their implication for the classroom experience became a point of contention between me and my consultant. What my consultant interpreted as confusion and disengagement, a problem in need of a solution, I interpreted as a necessary part of learning philosophy. Where my consultant saw confusion, I saw students slowly beginning to master the material, improving in both reading comprehension and in their ability to raise effective criticisms.

At first I found it frustrating attempting to disentangle my consultant's interpretations of the classroom from her observations. In spite of this initial frustration, my consultant and I worked together to find ways to make our partnership productive, and I gained many useful and unexpected lessons through the process. Perhaps the most useful insight concerned the role of silence. When reading my consultant's notes from class, I noticed that a repeating pattern had caught her attention. Large sections of her classroom notes read roughly like this:

Professor asks a question.

Students are silent.

Student gives an answer.

Professor responds.

Students are silent.

When I first encountered this pattern, repeating again and again in my consultant's notes, I was surprised. For one, this classroom dynamic looked superficially problematic – where was the lively discussion, in which students are engaging with the material and with each other? Second, I had not realized how often the students were silent after my questions or comments. Perhaps part of the reason I had not noticed this pattern is that during the silences, I was often thinking about my students' recent comments, and how I could use those comments to help guide the discussion toward the main points in the readings. I was also aware of something that my consultant was not in a position to observe: the discussion was progressing during those silent pauses. After a student offered an answer to a question, and I had pressed her response with my comment, more often than not the next student to offer a comment had learned from that exchange. To me, the silences were part of the learning process. But since I was immersed in that process, I had not noticed the dynamic in its most simple form: Professor asks a question, students are silent, student responds. Repeat.

Seeing this pattern in my classroom was illuminating, helping me to think about the role that silence plays in learning philosophy, and to embrace those silences deliberately. I realized how much of professional philosophy involves an audience sitting in silence with tortured faces, their minds crunching away on a problem. More importantly, I realized how this dynamic might look to an outsider, or to a student taking a philosophy class for the first time. As a funny illustration, I recalled an exchange I had witnessed on social media. A friend had posted a picture of an audience at a professional philosophy conference. Several of the audience members had their heads in their hands; others scrunched up their faces into pained expressions. In the comment section, someone had written “What in the world did you SAY to those people?” It occurred to me that many students encountering philosophical discussion for the first time may be as surprised as that commenter, and wonder how to interpret the silences and pained expressions which I took for granted as a normal part of philosophical discussion.

A breakthrough in my work with my consultant came when we turned our discussion explicitly to the role of silence in the classroom, and whether silence — and even confusion — can sometimes be productive. Through our discussion, I became clearer on the role that I see silence playing in the classroom: it provides time for students to think and formulate their questions, a space to grapple with their confusion. One of the valuable skills a student can learn from a philosophy class is how to confront confusion and come up with a question that gets to the heart of it. But the only way to learn this skill is for students to take time during the class to think in silence. While my consultant was providing suggestions for activities that would help to avoid silences, I was becoming more clear on my implicit commitment to integrating silence into the classroom. I realized that one of my goals is to help students learn to use periods of silence to formulate a question that helps to identify (and hopefully alleviate) confusion. It was the first time that I had explicitly identified my pedagogical commitment to silence. Becoming clear on this commitment opened up several new areas for discussion with my consultant, which in turn yielded more effective strategies for incorporating silence into the classroom.

One new topic that opened up as a result of our discussion concerned the observation that there are different types of silence. My consultant and I agreed that not all types of silence are productive. Some silences are the result of confusion about the question, which could be addressed through further clarification. My consultant further pointed out that it's important to

have some way of finding out what's going on for each student during periods of silence, to discover when the silences are productive, and when they signal the need for clarification. In response to this worry, my consultant and I came up with a plan involving a final question. I would reserve the final 10 min of class for students to ask a final question out loud to the group. The final question could be drawn from anything covered during class: a question about the material, a request for further discussion of some point, or a substantive objection to one of the arguments. I would use the final questions to gauge the students' understanding of the material, and to construct my next lesson plan to address those questions.

Given the discrepancy between my consultant's experience of the class dynamic and my own, I began to wonder about my students' experience of the rhythm of our classroom. While I could see that my students were learning the material and reaching the learning goals I had set for each class, I wondered whether the students were noticing this progress, and whether they could see how the silences were contributing to our progress. I decided that the best way to ensure that students were aware of our progress as a class was to make my commitments more transparent. The first step was to have a brief discussion about silence in our classroom. I explained to students that since philosophy deals with questions that don't have obvious answers, part of the goal of philosophy is to learn how to confront confusion and begin asking questions that yield greater clarity. When confronted with a difficult or confusing question, it's okay not to have an answer right away, and to require time to think about it. Being confused is to be expected, even for the most seasoned philosopher. Identifying what exactly is confusing provides a way forward in the discussion. The second way that I implemented greater transparency was by introducing a class map, a visual aid that outlined key concepts and learning goals for each class. The students could now follow along on the class map and see more easily when we had reached a key point. While this progress had been clear to me all along, the map was intended to help students see that the direction of our discussion was deliberate, and that my questions and comments were directing them toward achieving our learning goals.

Having identified the positive role that silence can play in the philosophy classroom, I began to develop new strategies for integrating silence more deliberately into the classroom. For example, my discussion of silence with my consultant and the students in my 200-level seminar-style class inspired me to think about ways to integrate silence into a larger, lecture-based class. I realized that my intro students, like the students in my seminar, required periods of silence to think about the material and articulate their questions. But unlike in a small seminar, in a lecture-based class silence does not emerge naturally, since the pace of the course is set by the lecturer rather than the discussants. My intro classroom was often lively and the conversations during activities flowed freely; however, in anonymous feedback, several students pointed out that without time for reflection, they had difficulty deepening their understanding of the material. There was little time to be alone with one's thoughts. To address this, I added silent thinking periods to the lecture. At strategic points during lectures, I would pause for 30-60 seconds, and we would spend that time silently thinking about an argument, concept, or particular question on the slides. I encouraged students to use silent thinking periods to jot down questions or objections, or to revise past questions or objections based on what they had learned. Incorporating silent thinking periods into the lecture gave students a chance to think about the material, without using up much class time (2-3 min per class). Later, students had a chance to come back to their insights

from the silent thinking periods during group discussion or activities. This is one way that I've used my work with my student consultant to deliberately integrate silence into the classroom.

In my partnership with my consultant, our central point of disagreement became the most useful learning opportunity for me. Having the pace of my classroom brought to my attention made it clear to me that classrooms differ widely in terms of time spent on lecture, discussion, and silent reflection. Becoming aware of the silence in my classroom enabled me to think about the ways in which it does (or does not) serve my pedagogical goals, and this has helped me to identify ways to pace my classroom more effectively, and to use silence more deliberately.