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Rethinking Classroom Participation

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Rethinking Classroom Participation

Summary

Within the classroom, feelings of alienation can adversely affect students' ability to speak, and thus serve to reproduce social inequities. This is especially the case with some first year students who may not have had many opportunities to speak, as well as students from different cultures where talking in class may not be the norm. To help mitigate power imbalances, it is necessary to develop a diversity of teaching practices and approaches to learning to ensure that each student feels that her class participation counts.

In this workshop, I want to consider ways in which it is possible to encourage participation by incorporating verbalization and vocalization techniques into the classroom.

Keywords

silence, participation, verbalization, vocalization, discussion, power dynamics

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SUMMARY

Within the classroom, feelings of alienation can adversely affect students' ability to speak, and thus serve to reproduce social inequities. This is especially the case with some first year students who may not have had many opportunities to speak, as well as students from different cultures where talking in class may not be the norm. To help mitigate power imbalances, it is necessary to develop a diversity of teaching practices and approaches to learning to ensure that each student feels that her class participation counts.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this seminar, participants will be able to:

- Examine power dynamics in the classroom that may serve to silence some students
- Identify at least three ways to facilitate equitable classroom participation and establish feelings of belonging among students.
- Discuss the differences between verbalization and vocalization
- Conceive of strategies to incorporate verbalization exercises into your personal teaching context as a means of encouraging learner participation, enhancing reflection, and validating participants' contributions.

As instructors, it is important to be cognizant of how power inequities—both interpersonal and structural—work to silence some students. In the workshop, we will discuss the different ways that an instructor can inadvertently silence some students. For instance, a talking gap within the classroom can sometimes feel unsettling for an instructor. In my own experience, in my eagerness to keep discussion flowing, I have rephrased a question so as to elicit a response. Upon reflection, however, I can see that what I wanted to do was to avoid those moments of uncomfortable silence. Yet, silence can be productive to learning. By making room for silence in the classroom, students

can gain from time spent in reflection. Furthermore, allowing for silence opens up the learning environment so that those who are less vocal have time to compose their thoughts, and to express themselves in a way that makes them feel that their contribution is important.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Olin, R. (2008). Silent pedagogy and rethinking classroom practice: Structuring teaching through silence rather than talk. *Cambridge Journal of Teaching*, 38, (2) 265–280.

Olin argues that the emphasis on speech in the classroom places a negative value upon silence. This emphasis on speech reveals a cultural bias in most Western universities that can feel alienating to students from other cultures. Key to Olin's argument is the difference between what she terms "vocalization," which is speech, and other forms of verbalization. These different forms of verbalization include silent activities such as journaling. Additionally, Olin contends that classroom observations are an important source of information. If teachers observe silent pedagogy, which is how classroom 'bodies' tell us things, the instructor will become more sensitive to different styles of learning.

In the workshop, we will discuss ways in which we can learn to be more observant in class. We will also share knowledge of in-class activities that take advantage of different ways to encourage student participation. As well, we will consider how physical space can have a negative impact on learning, and share ideas about how we can develop a more positive learning environment.

Zembylas, M., & Michaelides, P. (2004). The sound of silence in pedagogy. *Educational Theory*, 54 (2), 193-202.

Zembylas & Michaelides maintain that, in Western society, we constantly privilege speech in the classroom. Yet speaking is not always as conducive to learning as is often assumed. The authors contend that there is a cultural fear of silence that results in a focus on an overemphasis on vocal participation in the classroom. This focus on speaking can, however, produce an environment that silences some students.

The authors argue that silence is an alternative way of viewing the world that is being lost in our present-day focus on speech. As such, they regard it as vital for teachers to reflect upon their own fears or resistance to silence, and find ways to actively encourage its positive dimensions in the classroom. In the workshop, I will ask participants to think about their own resistance to classroom silence in the break-out sessions.

Through journaling, each participant will be able to reflect on their own conscious and unconscious bias so that together we can arrive at some practical solutions to this issue.

Alcoff, L. (2008). The politics of speaking for others. In Alison Jaggar, (Ed.) *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*, pp. 484-496. Boulder: Paradigm Press.

Alcoff asks teachers to consider the different ways in which some voices can be silenced in the university setting. To address some of the structural inequities that affect voice, Alcoff states that it is vital to consider why some people have been given the right to speak while others “speak haltingly, with apologies, if they speak at all” (p. 492). One practical way to remedy this disparity within the classroom is to allow sufficient time and space for each student to speak. By opening up a space for contemplation within the classroom, more thoughtful analysis may emerge. Furthermore, this silent space can enable those who are reticent about voicing their opinions to have time to compose their thoughts. This silent space is an essential part of creating an authentic learning environment where all students feel able to participate.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

The workshop will focus on different methods to rethink classroom participation so as to provide a learning environment where all students feel comfortable. Participants will learn strategies regarding how to pay attention to power dynamics in the classroom that can work to silence some voices more than others. They will also learn ways to overcome personal discomfort with classroom silences.

A detailed outline of the workshop is as follows:

Time	Topic/Content
0-10 mins	Overview of presentation and learning outcomes.
10-25 mins	First break-out Session I: In the first break-out session, participants will be asked to discuss how silence in the classroom makes us feel uncomfortable. We will begin by reflective journaling, followed by small group discussion.

25-40 mins	Review of break-out session followed by PowerPoint presentation: <i>Rethinking Classroom Participation: Vocalization and Verbalization Techniques</i>
40-55 mins	Break-out Session II: In the second break-out session, participants will be encouraged to share current strategies, as well as develop other ways of incorporating vocalization and verbalization techniques into their teaching. Participants will be placed in different groups than in the first break-out session so that they can learn from alternative perspectives. Following the group session, there will be time for journaling.
55-70 mins	Mini-break, 3-5 mins, followed by review of break-out session.
70-80 mins	PowerPoint Presentation: <i>Rethinking Classroom Participation: Speech and Silence</i>
80-90 mins	Review of key points, final Q&A and time for evaluation of session.

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

I have organized the presentation so that it will appeal to different learning styles by including a diversity of pedagogical methods, such as instruction with PowerPoint, as well as small group exercises and opportunities for journaling. In order to enable participants to concentrate on the subject matter, I will advise them that the PowerPoint slides will be sent out after the workshop.

To encourage participation, time has been allocated for sharing knowledge in small groups as well as through question and answer sessions in the larger group. As well, I have also built in time for personal reflection so that participants can think about their learning barriers and what ways they might mitigate these prejudices and, in so doing, improve their own teaching. Finally, I have allotted time for evaluation at the end of the session.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By opening up a space for silence within the classroom, more thoughtful analysis may emerge. It will enable students who are reticent about voicing their opinions to have time to compose their thoughts, as well as encourage those who are more vocal to think about the benefits of contemplation. For these reasons, I would contend that if we take account of how silence can be a productive component in teaching, we will be better able to create an authentic learning environment in the university classroom that feels more welcoming to all students. By incorporating both verbalization and vocalization techniques into our teaching, we will encourage learning, and enhance our own teaching.

HANDOUT – ENCOURAGING CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

Desired Outcomes

Incorporating different activities into your teaching will create a learning atmosphere where all students feel their participation is valued. By providing diverse learning opportunities, you will encourage active listening, greater participation, and help break down cultural barriers in the classroom.

Overcoming Barriers

First, it is important to consider what might be stopping students from participating in the classroom. These factors might include: feelings of not belonging; fear of saying the wrong thing; lack of understanding; language barriers; other students, and your own style of teaching. As you plan your teaching, consider how you would deal with each problem. For example, you can lessen students' anxiety by letting them know that there is no wrong answer, and that differing views are welcome. To increase a sense of belonging in the seminar or tutorial setting, encourage students to get to know each other's names. In small group settings, make your students feel welcome by asking them for their preferred name, rather than going by what appears on their student record, as well as the correct pronunciation.

Mix it Up

As instructors, it is important to recognize our own preferred method of learning. For example, if you are comfortable lecturing with copious notes, spend 15-20 minutes each class away from the lectern, and incorporate spontaneity into your teaching approach.

By integrating different teaching styles into the classroom, you will enrich your own teaching as well as enable students with different learning styles to feel comfortable participating in class.

Facilitating Questions

Some students need more time to stop and think about questions before they respond. Here are three techniques that you can use. First, try not to answer your own questions or rephrase too quickly. You can avoid doing this by making sure that you pause long enough, 10-15 seconds at least, before you start to rephrase the question. If you regularly allow for a silent space between questions and answers, this offers students time to respond.

Second, it may be that a question that you thought was easy is not clear to a student. Maybe you are using terminology that is unfamiliar to them. Or perhaps you are

asking more than one question at a time so that students may find it confusing as to which question you want them to answer. If you begin by asking straightforward questions, students will gain confidence. This way, you can then build upon those easy questions as you move through the material.

Third, it may be that you are speaking too fast for some students to comprehend what you are saying. Oftentimes, when we are nervous, a common tendency is to speak too fast. Slowing down and repeating key phrases can help students understand better. In so doing, you will find your own anxiety level decreases.

Inject Fun into the Classroom through Round Robin Exercises

Round robin exercises can be a method of injecting a sense of fun into the class, and provide students with a non-threatening way of finding their voices. A round robin exercise is a fast-paced activity where every student says something in response to a question. For instance, begin the class by asking students to give you a phrase or word that describes this week's reading. At the end of the class, you can repeat this exercise by asking students what they enjoyed about that particular class.

Use Sparkers to Ignite Creativity

A sparker is an exercise that encourages students to think creatively. Sparkers can take the form of a journal exercise. For instance, ask students to take a few minutes to write down a description of something related to the course theme. (Make sure that you tell them whether you want this information handed in, or let them know if it's theirs to keep.)

You could build on this activity by asking those students who are comfortable to share their thoughts with the class.

Sparkers can also be used to get students familiar with presenting in class. Here, the professor allows the students to pose questions that relate to a course reading and 'spark' class debate.

Encourage Constant Feedback

In the initial weeks of class, you may want to offer students the opportunity to tell you what concerns they are having with course reading or taking part in the discussion. One way of inviting participation is to give out blank pieces of paper, and ask students for anonymous feedback. This way, shy students may feel more able to inform you of their concerns. It also has the added advantage of letting you know what concepts students are having difficulty comprehending. Then you can address these issues in your next class.

By encouraging feedback in this way, you help students to think about what they are having issues with, and ensure that your teaching is relevant to the learning needs of your students.

Additional Resources

<http://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/increasing-student-participation>.

“Facilitating Discussions in Humanities and Social Science.” The McGraw Center.
Princeton University.

<http://www.princeton.edu/mcgraw/library/sat-tipsheets/facilitating-discussion/>.