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## How I Learned to Embrace the Awkward Silences to Promote Class Participation

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## **HOW I LEARNED TO EMBRACE THE AWKWARD SILENCES TO PROMOTE CLASS PARTICIPATION**

*Benjamin Le, Professor of Psychology, Haverford College*

In the spring semester of 2019, I taught a new course on the topic of *Open Science and Inclusive Psychology*. The class had sprung from my emerging interest in the new best research practices for making psychological science transparent and accessible to ultimately improve the quality of research findings in my field, and reflected a pivoting in my scholarly focus. The course enrolled 16 students, diverse across many dimensions of identity, and in terms of their background in psychology, they ranged from a student in her first year at college to several senior psychology majors and minors, including one who had graduate-level statistics training. I was also paired with a student partner, Maya, a psychology student from Bryn Mawr College, who worked with me in the role of student consultant through the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program, sitting in to observe the classroom dynamic and offer constructive feedback about inclusive pedagogy. The weekly conversations with Maya were complemented by a weekly workshop with other faculty, supported by a grant from the Lumina Foundation, who were interested in learning to teach more inclusively and similarly working with student partners in their classes.

In one of our first meetings early in semester Maya asked about how I felt about the discussion and dynamic in a recent class meeting. I distinctly remember coming out of that class session feeling that it had gone really well and was looking forward to the fun that teaching this new course was sure to bring for the rest of the semester. Naturally, I responded that the conversation was exciting, interactive, and that the students seemed very engaged.

Maya opened her notebook to a page that included a carefully hand-drawn overhead schematic of the seminar room: a large rectangle as the table, surrounded by 17 circles depicting the 16 students and me sitting at the table. The drawing also noted which members of the class appeared to be students of color and noted the visible gender of each student. Using this drawing, Maya had been tallying student contributions in the class, both in terms of responding to the questions I had posed and also asking questions of their own.

It turns out that my perceptions were only partially true. That class had been interactive and engaging...for a handful of white, mostly male students with whom I had engaged nearly exclusively for those 90 minutes. As a quantitative psychologist, I couldn't argue with the data. It was clear that a small subset of students had participated while many sat on the sidelines, and that I had perpetuated this inequitable pattern of participation by the way I had engaged (or not) with the students. I was dismayed to learn my perceptions of the class dynamic could be so far from the truth and that I had not connected with the majority of the students in the class that day.

Maya and I spent the rest of our meeting talking about strategies to create a classroom space where all students are empowered to participate, which reinforced many of the inclusive practices that my colleagues and I had been learning in our faculty workshop. I realized that I had been defining success in the classroom by the level of my own excitement rather than by the level of student engagement. This seems obvious to me now, but at the time was a revelation. My

own enthusiasm for the class material had actually been a barrier for many students to engage because I had not provided sufficient space for them to reflect or offered them inviting opportunities to contribute to the discussion. Instead, I had been quickly reacting when particular students jumped into the conversation by engaging in focused conversations with them in front of the rest of the class. Maya encouraged me to slow down, create space, and wait to make sure all students had time to gather their thoughts and sum up the courage to respond or ask a question. She was confident that if I created an inviting space, they would participate.

During the next meeting of class, I made a conscious effort to make time for students to pause and think, and to not quickly call on the first students raising their hands when I posed a question. And it was...awkward.

When Maya and I met following that class, she again asked me how the class went and I recounted the awkwardness. I noted the uncomfortable silences and feeling bad about passing over the eager hand-raisers, hoping that a previously unengaged student would say something. I was so disappointed that the strategies I had tried in that class session had killed the energy that I had perceived, and felt as if I had not had any fun teaching that class.

Once again Maya pulled out her notebook, where she again had drawn the class and tracked the conversation and student participation, and produced the data. Although I had lamented that the class seemed slow and the students seemed unengaged, Maya smiled and described how she had noted that every student had participated in that class, and that from her perspective, there was more positive energy, engagement, and smiles from the students than the previous class meeting. When I stepped back and provided space for students to reflect, all students had a chance to connect with the class material, make contributions, and have their questions answered. What seemed slow and awkward to me was, in fact, just the right pace for the students to feel welcomed into the conversation.

**Student Partner's Perspective:** *Maya Gorstein, Bryn Mawr College '20*

In all of my experience as a student at Bryn Mawr College, I've noticed extraordinary differences in professional pedagogy. While I can't recall a single unkind professor — in my 4 years at the university, the fingers on my hand are insufficient in cataloging the numbers of teachers who have helped me feel truly welcome as a multiracial, sexual and gender minority member of the classroom. I will always treasure my experiences as a student consultant for the SaLT program — connecting with Professor Le was a rare and valuable opportunity for me to see the professor's perspective, and to advance my own confidence as a university student within the scholarly sphere. I was delighted with the way Professor Le evolved, from eager yet uninformed to being able to sit comfortably with awkwardness; he ultimately fostered a truly evolved environment where all walks of students could speak up and be unafraid to be heard. Through my experiences with Professor Le, I learned to value my own instincts and opinions, and appreciate that no matter how established a person may be in an academic canon, there is always room for growth. When imperfection is inevitable (it is human, after all), humble aspiration is our greatest strength.