Silence as an Educational Tool to Deconstruct Normative Societal Structures and Create Epistemic Trust

Milad Mohebali
University of Iowa, milad-mohebali@uiowa.edu

Elmira Jangjou
University of Iowa, elmira-jangjou@uiowa.edu

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Introduction

As international graduate students from Iran studying educational policy and leadership studies in the United States, where the curriculum centers U.S. higher education, we struggled discerning the silence that sometimes followed our comments in the graduate seminars. We questioned our own understanding, linguistic capacity to communicate our ideas, our ways of knowing, gender dynamics, or even the relevance of our comments. However, as we shared these experiences with each other, we realized these silences were not always about us as individuals or because of our gender identities (one of us identifies as a cisgender man and the other as a cisgender woman) (Mohebali & Jangjou, forthcoming). We have since named these silences where our capacity as knowers was questioned for what it is: epistemic oppression. Epistemic oppression occurs when repeated practice of silencing impairs a group's ability to be heard and to speak (Dotson, 2011). These silences were artifacts of the absence of a Global South[1] perspective within a Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy. Soon, as graduate teaching assistants, we were finding silences in our own classes. Teaching courses on social justice and issues of diversity and equity, we started to use silence as a pedagogical tool to deconstruct the normative assumptions of the field and the society that keeps the silence (Murray & Durrheim, 2019). In this teaching activity, we introduce *third thinging* (Watt et al., 2022)—a practice for centering ideas in dialogues around systems of oppression—as a teaching practice to deconstruct silence with students in the classroom and to create epistemic trust when ways of knowing and being are incommensurate (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We explain in this piece how for educators, silence can be a tool to humanize difference rather than to silence the marginalized knowers and subaltern knowledge.

Rationale

While we never shared a class with one another, we both experienced silence after some of our comments in doctoral classes on various topics. The silence resulted in the dismissal of our intellectual contribution and erasure of our point of view. These silences have previously been studied by international scholars studying in the United States, but often through the lens of language or sociocultural

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[1] We acknowledge the essentializing language here flattening Global South. However, we choose this language to highlight the breadth of the absence.

differences and competencies (e.g., Nepalese students in the United States, Bista, 2012; or East Asian students in Western contexts, Zhou et al., 2005). Studying in a predominantly white institution, we observed similar silences after Latinx and Black American students talked in class discussions; at points, we, too, participated in shifting conversations after another student's comment (Mohebali & Jangjou, forthcoming). These observations made us examine silence not as an issue about international or other marginalized students, but as an exercise of power in the classroom. Key here is that for some students, like us, these silences kept happening as a pattern that over time made us silent—in that, we were not willing to participate fully in the classroom (Mohebali & Jangjou, forthcoming). As Dotson (2011) explains, epistemic oppression happens when knowers are silenced because of their identities and standpoint through a repeated pattern of not being heard. In this respect, silence as a pause in class discussion, silencing as an act of dismissing someone's ideas by changing the topic of the conversation, or silence as absence of a student's voice created over time, are not mere empty spaces and rather carry much meaning about the society that keeps this silence(ing) (Murray & Durrheim, 2019).

The rationale for this teaching activity is to equip students with the skills to critically reflect on *how* they engage in the discussion and not just what they share in the classroom. This activity takes silence(ing) as a site of learning for helping students to deconstruct what silences are and do, either as students experience being silenced or when they silence other students during this discussion. By placing the silence(ing) as a boundary object (or a *third thing*), this process of *third thinging* silence can be used to help students build relational epistemic trust. *Third thinging* is the act of situating the idea (the thing—in this case, silence) at the center of the conversation and having students share their own experience of the *third thing* while in conversation with one another (Watt et al., 2022). Daukas (2006) explains this epistemic trust as a self-critical perspective on engaging with others from different social locations and understanding one's own perspective as socially located. Moreover, this view of silence holds all students accountable "to and beyond just their individual positionalities or identities. . . by focusing on the [silence]" (Watt et al., 2022, p. 12). Thus, the process requires students to reflect on themselves as social constructors of the classroom discussion with a responsibility for creating an inclusive environment by reconsidering how they relate to silence(ing). The goal is not for students to avoid silence, but to sit productively with how silences appear in class discussions, how students' contributions may be dismissed by shifting the topic, or the silence that comes from students' refusal to contribute to class because they have been silenced already.

Learning Objectives

After completing this activity students will:
1. Understand silence as containing meaning and potentially an exercise of power.
2. Redefine what it means to engage in silence(ing) and why they might choose to engage in silence.
3. See themselves as knowledge co-creators responsible for creating an inclusive learning environment.
4. Attend to how silences may have silenced them or shifted how they interact in class discussions.

Explanation

We developed a lesson plan for a proseminar class designed to socialize doctoral students (Ph.D. and Ed.D.) for programs in a college of education. We invited students to understand, and reflect on, the different ways that silence in class discussions might make some students doubt their ways of knowing and their capacity as legitimate knowers. The class was composed of white students and several international students. We implemented this lesson plan in an online class (but this activity can be used in person as well) by settling in through *third thinging* a poem by David Baraza (2002), named "A Place Without Shame." After reading the poem, we asked students to raise words, stanzas, or phrases that resonated with them, while telling them it is okay to repeat what has already been shared in the room. This process helps create an environment where students listen to one another without feeling the need to respond back, rather tasking them with listening purposefully to one another (Watt et al., 2022). After a brief discussion on the poem, we shared a quote ("silences come to define the society that keeps them;" Murray & Durrheim, 2019, p. 1) and provided the students with an introduction to our own experiences of silence as international graduate students. Elmira explained how what she had shared in a past class was left out of the conversation as her other classmates shifted the conversation to a different topic without any acknowledgment of her perspective. Milad shared his experiences of silencing another student's perspective as he tried to show that he, too, had something to contribute to the class discussions in a past course. This positioning of us as graduate international students as both victims but also perpetrators of silencing helped shift the conversation from an *us* (international students) vs. *them* (domestic students) position and invited more complex thinking into the space. That is, we used the examples as a way of introducing silence(ing) as the *third thing* and not to focus on the issue of international vs. domestic students as a topic for discussion. Similarly, other educators can use their own examples and make sure that it is the silence(ing) that is centered for discussion.

We then concluded by discussing how silence can be both what we may often consider a pause in class discussions (silence) but also a pause and shift away from what was shared previously without necessarily pausing the discussions (silence-ing), or even the absence of participation due to learned silence (silence-ing over time).

After this demonstration, we asked the students to think for about three minutes about a scenario in which they experienced silence(ing). Next, we invited them into pair-share breakout rooms to reflect in dialogue about the following prompts:

- What comes up for you when you think of your experiences of silence or silence(ing)?
- What is the content of silence? What is *in* it?
- What does silence make visible for us as learners, as classmates, and as facilitators of each other's learning?

After the students returned from their small group discussions, we invited them to share a take-away from their conversations, debriefing with the class.

Debriefing

The debriefing discussion at the end of our teaching activity helped students to engage in a deeper conversation, offer their own perspectives, and explore each other's experiences with silence and silencing. The reactions from students varied widely, with some domestic students with privileged identities not being sure if the silence was anything other than just an artifact of a class discussion. They acknowledged they have noticed silence as a pause or the shifting of the conversation but did not think of it as silence(ing). For another student, silence was a choice they made in order to allow other students to have space for conversation.

For students who had been silenced or had experienced silence(ing), the responses were more complex. One student shared a reflection from their interactions with faculty outside of the class, after which they decided to be silent in discussions. International students (some only in their first class experience in the United States) shared their experience with silence even though not all of them were quite sure how the silence connected with silence(ing). Another international student shared how they observe their classmates' nods to gauge engagement with their ideas.

Overall, this debriefing allowed students to hear each other's experiences and reflect more carefully about *how* they engage with each other in classroom discussion as an important aspect of social justice work. At the end, we encouraged the students to keep thinking and observing their experiences with silence and to

explore whether they engage differently with this phenomenon after this *third thinging* activity.

Assessment

As the two co-facilitators, we engaged in a conversation to reflect on our observations regarding the class discussion. We observed that students defined and understood silence in multiple ways. We also shared how we both noticed several international students' affirmative nodding as they listened to their peers sharing experiences with silence. This dialogue between the two of us while assessing the class activity inspired us to develop an assessment activity and ask the students to write about whether and how their engagement and experiences with silence have changed after we did this activity in the classroom. We recommend posing these questions three to four weeks after the activity so that the activity is still fresh in students' minds, but also leaving them time to reflect on it in their classes in this timeframe. The prompt and questions for reflection and assessment activity are below.

Please reflect on our class discussions three weeks ago and reply to the following questions:
- In the class, you shared whether you had experienced silence, have silenced others in class discussions, or have not observed silence or silencing. How has the class activity shifted your understanding of silence or silencing since then?
- How has this activity helped you, if at all, to pay attention to *how* you engage in classroom discussions?

Conclusion

In this teaching activity, we interrogate what it means to learn not just from absences in the content, but from the absence of voices, and silences in classroom dialogues. We focused on the silence that we experienced as international graduate students in the United States as an artifact of the absence of a Global South perspective in the Eurocentric curriculum of our doctoral classes. Then, we introduced a teaching practice to help establish epistemic trust between students by bringing their attention to how they engage in silencing and with silence in classroom discussions. This practice can help students to see themselves and one another as full knowers discussing topics from their own standpoints and help create a more humanizing classroom experience for students as they engage with their differences and subaltern knowledges.

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