Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

Embracing the silence: introverted learning and the online classroom

Karen Harris, Intercultural Communications Trainer and Language Development Tutor, Language Centre

Abstract

In 2020, when teaching and learning went online in a great hurry, much of the initial emphasis was on matching the real-life experience as closely as possible. What has since become apparent, however, is that the online classroom is not merely transplanting the physical space into a virtual setting. On the contrary, it has challenged longstanding assumptions of what we mean by participation and active engagement. It presents immense transformational opportunities, which may lead to a more reflective and less pressured classroom pedagogy: one which is sympathetic to the (historically under-acknowledged) needs of introverted learners.

Keywords
classroom; introversion; online learning; participation; silence; pandemic

Back in 1991, in my first term at university, our tutor set a strict ground rule for seminar discussions. "You don't leave this room," she told us, "until you've said something".

Ever since, I've had mixed feelings about this kind of pedagogy and its stance of compulsory contribution. On the one hand, it may foster a culture of active participation ensuring that nobody flies under the radar, unseen and unacknowledged. But I'm certain there were times when I said something trite, facile or downright embarrassing, just for the sake of compliance. Intellectually, I'd have fared better simply by listening attentively until I'd formulated something worth bringing to the conversation.

Fast forward three decades: there are still those who would gleefully take centre-stage and those who, given the choice, would lurk in the shadows. *Plus ça change.* But here's the thing: in a physical classroom, even if a student is silent, they are still a tangible, visible, live presence. In the online space, by contrast, the lurkers of the group can far more easily melt into the background. Literally muted, literally invisible, devoid of movement and geographically remote. The only sign of their presence is a name on the attendee list or gallery view (bearing in mind that having the camera-on is not always feasible). And, unable to monitor them with our normal teacher senses, skills and instincts, we might panic. The classroom, after all, is our dominion. The *online* classroom challenges power dynamics: tutors are no longer all-seeing and all-powerful.

So what to do about silent, faceless lurkers?

Before I go on, it is worth making a wider point. Ever since multi-user communities have existed, a huge proportion of users have indeed been lurkers rather than posters. For further explanation of this

principle, known as the '90-9-1 Rule', see Nielsen (2006). The core point remains valid: that lurking is normal human behaviour rather than an aberration. And this applies whether it occurs inside or outside of the educational sphere.

Rather than offering suggestions for generating engagement – which has been done elsewhere – I would like to offer a series of three provocations. The underlying question is: could the digital classroom be an opportunity to accommodate those who have a more introverted learning preference – and even to embrace their silence?

Provocation 1: Might the pressure to actively participate actually be counter-productive?

In the physical classroom, I have seen students freeze in terror when a question is fired at them. The sheer demand to contribute on tap – to simultaneously process the question, conceptualise an intellectually coherent response, and find the vocabulary and syntactical structure with which to deliver that response – can simply be too great an ask. And who can blame these students? Anyone who is not super-skilled at speed-thinking and oratory might easily find themselves in a similar situation, regardless of educational background or first language.

> Offering opportunities for students to sit without distraction helps them absorb content and remember it and think about additional questions. They can process the feelings and ideas expressed by their peers and consider the importance of other perspectives.
> (Weeks, 2018)

A key phrase here is "without distraction". When a student is dreading the prospect of being picked upon and asked to contribute long before they are ready, it puts them in a state of continual stress. And that, clearly, is a distraction and a block to any meaningful or joyful learning.

Provocation 2: Do we need to recalibrate the notion of "active participation"? When it comes to learning, is "active/passive" a false dichotomy?

Haskins observes that the very idea of stillness and inactivity being worthwhile is a "radical departure from the commonly held belief that has taken deep root over the last half century: that activity and productivity are the true measures of success" (2010, p.16, cited in Fox-Eades, 2015). Somewhat paradoxically, might those periods of apparent "inactivity" actually be when a learner is at their most intellectually active? For these could be spaces where they are processing, considering and reflecting, rather than formulating and uttering superficial thoughts as a token of their mental alertness.

Fox-Eades (2015) points out that: "Silence, a quietening of mind and body, helps us to flourish, to think clearly and creatively". In support of this, she cites Alerby and Elídóttir: "It is in the silent reflection that our thoughts take shape and make the experience into learning" (2003, p.46, cited in Fox-Eades, 2015). This could actually be seen as a spiritual perspective: silence as a powerful transformative catalyst.

Writers and practitioners such as Fox-Eades perceive the importance of not just accepting, but welcoming and even initiating silence. In this way, introverted students might not be made to feel like under-achievers, to be tolerated at best and humiliated at worst. Instead, they would feel part of an authentic, reflective and mutually respectful community. Wesley (2013) writes of students who "are quiet because they are inclined toward silence; sanctioning silence in the classroom can relieve their

anxiety". Weeks (2018) reminds us that: "Building a community and culture comfortable with silent reflection takes regular practice, patience, and time."

Which leads us on to…

Provocation 3: What advantages might the online classroom offer for nurturing a profound, transformative silence?

In careful hands, the online classroom can be ideally suited to the kind of community-building mentioned above. It offers a liminal space in which we are all present, while also being physically located somewhere else. It's certainly possible that this bizarre yet (by now) familiar situation could mitigate the anxiety which might arise in a deathly quiet, nowhere-to-escape, real-life classroom.

Freed from the physical presence of others, the online space offers a special kind of privacy. With the mute / unmute, camera-on / camera-off buttons, our proximity to one another can be switched off and on at will. Might this reduce the sense of vulnerability and awkwardness among the less confident, and increase their sense of agency? It is worth noting here that the chat box is a reassuring presence, ready to receive ideas and responses once they've had time to be formulated, but – and this is crucial – without pressure.

Phillips (2017) urges us as teachers: "While students are working or thinking, don't use this as a time to share information. Resist the urge to break their concentration". How much easier this becomes when the presence of a mute button enables us to disengage instantly, for however long is needed, and avoid the temptation to fill the void with pointless utterances.

The next stage is to consider if and how some of these advantages might be transferred to the physical classroom. Of course, deciding what is and isn't feasible or desirable, and the exact strategies required, will require ongoing discussions and adaptations. But whether in-person or virtual:

> Listening without anticipating and articulating an immediate response provides space for understanding ideas, perspectives, and experiences that may differ from one's own. In this way, deep listening and silent reflection can help eliminate fear, bridge perceived divisions between individuals, and serve to support conflict resolution."
> (Weeks, 2018)

The embracing of introversion has immense and far-reaching implications, for both teachers and learners. Over the coming months and years it may mean re-defining some longstanding notions regarding power, participation and passivity. The online classroom has encouraged us to confront these notions– or at the very least, to query and challenge some of the assumptions that surround them.

References

Fox Eades, J. (2015) 'Silence and stillness in the classroom'. Available at:
https://jennyfoxeades.com/2015/02/12/silence-and-stillness-in-the-classroom/ (Accessed: 28
February 2022).

Nielsen, J. (2006) 'Participation Inequality: The 90-9-1 Rule for Social Features'. Nielsen Norman Group. Available at: https://www.nngroup.com/articles/participation-inequality/ (Accessed: 25 July 2022).

Phillips, K. (2017) 'How to use silence as a teaching tool'. Available at: https://theartofeducation.edu/2017/11/06/silence-teaching-tool/ (Accessed: 28 February 2022).

Weeks, D. (2018) 'The value of silence in schools'. Available at: https://www.edutopia.org/article/value-silence-schools (Accessed: 28 February 2022).

Wesley, C. (2013) 'Sanctioning silence in the classroom'. Available at: https://www.chronicle.com/article/sanctioning-silence-in-the-classroom/ (Accessed: 28 February 2022).

Biography
Karen Harris is an Intercultural Communications Trainer and Language Development Tutor, based at the UAL Language Centre. With 25 years' experience of teaching English, she has a particular interest in the relationship between the written word and artistic practice. In recent years, she has established both the UAL Language-Art Project and Many-Languages Poetry Club – using language as a source of fascination which unites diverse students in a spirit of mutual curiosity and creativity. Her publications include *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Mathematics and the Arts*, *Times Higher Education,* and a chapter in *Teach Communication with a Sense of Humor*. She has presented conference talks on a range of themes including the role of literature in the language classroom, surreal humour used as a teaching method, academic writing as an artistic skill, and the interdisciplinary connections between art and mathematics.