

Title: Practising silence in a community of inquiry

Author: Michelle Forrest

Affiliation: Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Canada

Postal Address:

Dr. Michelle Forrest  
P.O. Box 127  
Faculty of Education  
Mount Saint Vincent University  
166 Bedford Highway  
Halifax, NS, Canada  
B3M 2J6

E-mail: [michelle.forrest@msvu.ca](mailto:michelle.forrest@msvu.ca)

## **Practising Silence in a Community of Inquiry**

Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know.

- Laozi (Tao The Ching)

### *Introduction*

In his introduction to a polemical piece about funding for the arts in Canada, the award winning novelist, Yann Martel (2007), says:

To read a book, one must be still. To watch a concert, a play, a movie, to look at a painting, one must be still. Religion, too, makes use of stillness, notably with prayer and meditation. Just gazing upon a still lake, upon a quiet winter scene – doesn't that lull us into contemplation? Life, it seems, favours moments of stillness to appear on the edges of our perception and whisper to us, "Here I am. What do you think?"

In this technological age, awash in synthetically produced sound, stillness and silence are conspicuous by their absence. Classrooms manifest this condition in microcosm with the hum of computers and LCD projectors adding to the ambient sound of chairs, binders, papers, books, bags and utensils, sliding, dropping, opening, closing, zipping, clicking, slapping, and scraping, while human bodies shift, sigh, cough, giggle, and talk, talk, talk. The auditory diversity of this environment with its work chat, directed and spontaneous questioning and answering, side conversations, small-group discussion, and teacher voice-overs is a familiar dynamic of the democratic classroom. As Glass (2005) reminds us, "[d]emocratic citizenship is hard work" because it involves "the actual creation of civil society" which is "a robust participation" and "operates most meaningfully at the level of the community where our most heartfelt plural identities get enacted" (p. 85). Such participation is noisy work, as demonstrated in our assemblies of government.

Dewey (1944/1966) points to Plato's definition of a slave - one who "accepts from another the purposes which control his conduct" – as fatal to the diversity of stimulation necessary for novelty which, in turn, challenges thought. He goes so far as to

term 'slavery' any condition under which people are "engaged in activity which is socially serviceable, but whose service they do not understand and have no personal interest in" (85). What characterises a democratically constituted society is that it relies upon and recognizes mutual interests as a factor in social control, and it continually readjusts as it meets new situations produced by varied human interaction (p. 86-87). Dewey's influence on educational theory can hardly be overstated, not least the impact of his view that the school itself is "a form of social life, a miniature community and one in close interaction with other modes of associated experience beyond school walls" (p. 360).

Democracy as it pertains to the curriculum of schools has come to be viewed as more than the passing on of historical and procedural data *about* democratic systems. One movement in particular applies Dewey's vision of democracy as a way of life in schools to the organization of classroom talk; namely, the Philosophy for Children movement (P4C), which focuses on developing communities of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has participated in such a community will have witnessed an unpredictability that can be messy, to say the least. Like any democratic process, that characteristic of a community of inquiry is hard work characterized by talk, talk, and more talk. Through discussion, inquirers in the community work out every sort of problem, beginning with questions, suggestions, and careful consideration of the rules and mechanisms for their own discussions.

In the traditional classroom, teacher-talk dominates and student talk tends to be strictly controlled by a teacher's questioning for predetermined answers based upon information previously delivered through lecture or assigned reading. When discussion is

the plan, it tends to be carefully choreographed by the teacher and, though it may include small-group work, this tends to be managed according to teacher-designed tasks and questions for discussion. The soundscape of the traditional classroom is dominated by teacher-talk, most obviously in the delivery of information to the full group, and also whenever she raises her voice to direct students to focus on this or that point, get back on task, lower the hubbub, or beware that time is almost up. The teacher's voice dominates the soundscape of the traditional classroom not only in terms of its frequent voicing but also by its dynamic level, being more pointed and generally louder than those of students.

In the community of inquiry classroom, by contrast, voices tend to be more evenly balanced, even though the teacher's voice still dominates air time in her role as facilitator of student talk. Ideally, the community will be convened in a circle so students can hear and see one another easily and thereby know better who said what and with what tone and demeanor of delivery.<sup>2</sup> In such environments, the sound of rustling paper and low conversation may be a backdrop to the sounds of the teacher-moderated philosophical discussion.

In response to questions after a performance of his infamous composition *4'33"*, a solo piece in sonata form in which all the notes are silent, John Cage commented on how things have changed since he composed *4'33"* in the early 1950s:

We have less confidence now in the time as it goes into the future. We wonder, for instance, how long the future will be. We don't take for granted that it will be forever. You might say we wonder whether we have ruined the silence.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I shall consider what silence is, how we might conceive of it in pedagogical contexts, what effects and value it has in a community of inquiry, and how we might

name silence in our classrooms, make it part of our philosophical discussions, and cultivate generative silence as a practice.

### *I. What is silence?*

There is no such thing in conscious human experience as complete absence of sound since even when all external sound is dulled or still, one hears one's own breathing and the various noises of internal organs. Nonetheless, we have words to refer to the lessening or absence of sound and 'voice'.<sup>4</sup> The terms 'silence' and 'quiet' have come down to us unchanged from their primary denotations and forms in Latin [L. *silere* be silent, make silent; *quietare* reduce to quietness, quiet down (OED)]. The action of quieting down is synonymous with soothing or calming; whereas, silencing denotes making silent by force. The noun 'quiet' is synonymous with silence and stillness; 'silence' denotes "abstinence from speech or noise" (OED). Though in common usage the terms are used interchangeably, for the purpose of analyzing classroom scenarios, it is useful to distinguish 'quiet' from 'silence'. The former term shall refer to an objective state possessing "no or slight or gentle sound or motion" (OED), while the term 'silent' will be reserved for specific states of quiet in which 'voice', in the sense of agency and/or intention, can be heard or is stilled. Thus, we can apply this distinction to four snapshots from classrooms: 1) The room becomes quiet after the teacher calms students by raising her voice slightly, saying, "Please bring it down a bit so everyone can be heard"; 2) In the quiet room students work silently; 3) Silence prevails as the teacher waits for an answer; 4) Finally the teacher shouts "SILENCE!".

The first sentence describes the objective state of the classroom as regards the level of sound, motion, and overall calm following the teacher's act of settling students

by requesting politely that they lower their volume. The second situation describes a calm and relatively noise-free atmosphere in which each student works in his or her own mental-emotional space. Quiet is a likely result of student silence, though were extraneous noise to interrupt their concentrated work, both the quiet and the silence could be disturbed. In a quiet room, students could be quiet without being silent in our sense of the term; they could be interacting quietly through sign language or by passing notes.

The third scene implies that something is expected from someone. The phrase ‘silence prevails’ implies an imposition; the teacher’s authority in posing the question requires an answer or, depending upon her demeanor and intention, may even demand one. The gap between the expectation of a response and its being offered is referred to as ‘silence’, not because it is necessarily quiet in the room, but because attention is drawn to this gap. According to Sontag (1969), “[t]here is no neutral surface, no neutral discourse, no neutral theme, no neutral form. Something is neutral only with respect to something else – like an intention or an expectation” (p. 9-10). It is only when an expected or intended response does not occur that we infer that something or someone is silent, has kept silent and/or been silenced. When the teacher’s question is ‘met with silence,’ the situation is not *literally* free of sound; the shuffling of bodies and paraphernalia and other ambient sounds within and beyond the space of the classroom are all still present for anyone choosing to shift their attention. Ambient sound is, by definition, not the focus of attention [fr Latin *ambire* go round (OED)]. It goes round that to which we attend and when attention shifts, the relationship also shifts as the previously fore-grounded sound becomes ambient. A sound, like any other form, is only neutral with respect to something else. The teacher’s question leads up to and requires a response. It is the

expected voiced response of a student, to which all attention has been directed, that is missing and in that lack ambient sound comes forward and creates discomfort. In Korzybski's terms, reality and expectations have come into conflict (in Reuter 2005, p. 435). In reality, what is expected is absent and everyone is left waiting in what we perceive as silence. Paradoxically, silence can be deafening. Countless interior monologues take place as everyone waits expectantly for a voice to respond to a teacher's question. In that pregnant pause following the posing of the question, students' unvoiced voices proliferate: 'What did she say?!' 'Is it my turn?' The silence of this pause is referred to as 'pregnant' or full of potential consequences.

In the fourth instance, in which the teacher shouts the word 'silence' to her students, she or he is calling for more than mere quiet. This teacher has passed the point of frustration in struggling to dominate or control a group of free agents and resorts to shouting 'above' their 'voices'. Unlike the teacher in the first scenario, who raises her voice to establish a calmer and quieter atmosphere, this teacher shouts 'SILENCE!'<sup>5</sup> to demand students recognise his or her right to silence them. As teachers well know, anyone resorting to or feeling driven to use this tactic has likely already lost hope of sustaining mutual respect with that group.<sup>6</sup>

How might distinguishing silence from quiet help us interpret interaction in a community of inquiry? As in any class discussion, a certain level of calm or quiet is likely to support a better discussion, though discussions can be boisterous and productive at the same time. In a classroom philosophical discussion, facilitated as in the P4C approach, the teacher attempts to encourage a way of interacting as well as teaching the skills of doing philosophy. Ollin (2004) suggests that students do not view classroom

silence in a positive light because “the conditions in the classroom are not conducive to the comfortable silence of mutual companionship (p. 445).” Communities of inquiry do encourage a companionable atmosphere through a focus on caring thinking or reasoning, which fosters in students a relational consciousness (Sharp 2007, Thayer-Bacon 2002). In discussions, connections from one point to another are made not only with logic in mind, but also with an openness to personal anecdote and affective response. Liveliness, laughter, and the honest expression of personal problems emerge and with them the volume can rise along with tempers. The teacher needs to take care not to silence ‘voice’ in the effort to quiet things down to an appropriate level for all to hear and feel able to be heard.

Being able *literally* to be heard; i.e., in the sense that the sound one makes is transmitted to others, is, however, not a sufficient condition for understanding or even tolerance. As Li (2001) points out, with reference to the marginalized person in the classroom, the act of requiring her to speak does not insure that her ‘voice’ will be heard (p. 162-163). Blackman and Sadler-Smith (2009) suggest three ways in which silence refers to ‘voice’ that will not be spoken: when it is repressed, as in a person being motivated to exclude something from conscious awareness; when it is withheld consciously for purposes of individual power, acquiescence, or pro-social behaviours; and when it is suppressed in an involuntary silence in acquiescence to organizational norms and power (p. 573 & 577).

Though the teacher in a community of inquiry works to involve everyone in the discussion and may feel that she is doing so in a sensitive and non-threatening manner, there may be silencing pressures at work simultaneously with her best efforts at nurturing

a democratic classroom. Coaxing a student to speak may work against her larger intention, prompting him to withhold ‘voice’ as a defense mechanism so as to retain individual power in his life of being silenced. And yet, as Boler (2001) points out, to not encourage the marginalized person to find ‘voice’, or to only talk to him about the situation one-on-one, is to reinforce the marginalization one is trying to mitigate (p. 168).<sup>7</sup> In response to Li’s (2001) call for teachers to value and inquire into the multiple meanings of silence, Boler (2001) admits to being at a loss as to what exactly this would look like.

To this point, I have narrowed down some instances when, in classrooms, it is useful to distinguish silence from quiet and considered how silencing, intentional or not, can have deleterious effects on the aim of achieving the “robust participation” (Glass 2005, p. 85) necessary to communities of inquiry. Following Jaworski (1993) and Li (2001), I will forego any attempt to determine a final definition of silence, but not for the reason they give; namely, that the effort could end in an infinite regress of definitions. It seems to me that this is a risk one takes in trying to define anything. Rather, I will stop here because it is absurd to assume one can ever completely define the unspeakable. Let us consider, then, the value of practicing silence in communities of inquiry.

## *II. The value of silence*

Following their review of the literature on the use of communicative silence, Jaworski and Sachdev (1998) suggest that “silence appears as a rich communicative resource whose understanding requires the sophistication of a fine-grained, interdisciplinary analysis” (p. 273). To this end, they contribute to the literature by questioning 14- to 16-year-olds on their beliefs and attitudes about silence in the

classroom, and conclude that, apart from being a marker of communicative breakdown, negativity and conflict, silence is also viewed as “a facilitative device enabling students to gain access, organise and absorb new material.” On the other hand, Jaworski and Sachdev’s examination of a sample of references written by teachers for sixth formers applying for university admission demonstrate that “[s]ilence, reticence and quietness fare less well, and when mentioned, they are usually hedged about, softened and played down” (p. 286). Articulatness in students is lauded, while teacher referees attempt to provide counter-balancing evidence to mitigate the implied negative effects of being hesitant and quiet in class. Though students credit silence as a positive aspect of learning, teachers find ways to excuse it in their reports on student achievement.

In his study of teachers’ constructs of silence, Ollin (2004) found that the range of associations teacher-participants made between their characterizations of silence and their everyday lives was much broader than the range of associations they made to their professional practice as teachers (p. 444). For example, though they associated positive interpersonal silence in their everyday lives with comfortable companionship and the presence of another, no such associations were made to positive interpersonal silence in the classroom. One of his participants, who had the strongest negative association with silence in her everyday life, had a strong sense that as a teacher her responsibility was to get students to talk. In her own words, she “would not wait for silence” (p. 445). Another participant, a yoga teacher, was clear about the value of silence in her teaching. She saw herself as guiding students into silence, but did not recognise the paradox of doing so through the almost constant use of her own voice.

Ollin is clear that his limited sample – five teachers of adults - offers only a “pathfinder function”; it points towards areas of potential for future research (p. 443). One path he identifies is the implication of teachers’ limited associations with silence in the classroom context. Ollin suggests a further examination be made of the relationship between teaching identity and personal identity with a view to how “the more extensive and positive repertoire of silences in everyday life could be used within the classroom context” (p. 446).

In my teacher-education classrooms, the majority of students are women many of whom, over the 15 years of my teaching, demonstrate exactly those characteristics considered negatively in the teachers’ reference letters mentioned above: silence, hesitancy and quietness.<sup>8</sup> Reading Jaworski and Sachdev (1998), I realise that I have written similar letters, downplaying quietness and hesitancy in my students by using qualifiers and by citing evidence of counter-balancing tendencies in their written work. I also demonstrate this contradiction in class in the form identified by Alerby and Elidottir (2003): expecting silence one moment and the next urging students to speak. In the everyday stream of life, I cherish and seek out silence for its restorative powers. Like the students in Jaworski and Sachdev’s study, I believe silence helps me “gain access, organise and absorb new material” (p. 286). What is the value of silence in my everyday life outside the classroom?

In researching, composing, and revising an essay like this one, I require solitude and the quieting of many common sounds in my environment. I cannot hear myself think, as the saying goes, if others are talking, be they voices on radio and television, or those of others in the house. Caranfa (2004) describes his writing and revising process,

which mirrors my own: “In our silent reflections, we constantly doubt, evaluate, search for the best explanations, hesitate and integrate the thoughts of the reviewer with our own thoughts” (p. 229). Following my first move, to quiet my environment, I hear more clearly my interior monologue in the form of my own words and the words of the various texts I read. But, as these interior voices proliferate and my thinking gets muddled, I am drawn to take another step into silence by doing the dishes or taking a walk, thereby allowing thoughts to settle, recede, return, and generally revitalize, just as my body revitalises by moving and stretching. The click of the keyboard and rustle of papers stops as the sound of running water takes over. The wind in my ears or the sound of the sea lapping the shore readjusts or interrupts my interior monologue for a time. Visual images also serve to salve the sorely rushing vortex of thoughts. Here are two more moves into silence, one by way of interruptions or rests in my cacophonous thoughts (when thoughts are harmonising, I rarely need such breaks) and another into a cessation of that monologue as I allow my thoughts to be taken by wind or sea or the baked-on remains in the casserole dish. In this process, I quiet things around me and purposely silence the thoughts within me.

Korzybski (1958) characterizes levels of silence in relation to our use of words to describe things. Words are not the objects they refer to; “our *semantic reactions* are at *once trained in delusional values*, which must be pathological” (p. 422). He advocates the benefits of retraining our relationship to objects whereby “this ‘silence on the objective levels’ has been attained” (p. 423) and claims that silence is essential to sanity. “Silence introduces a delay in our actions by curbing the tendency to form rapid conclusions and inferences” (p. 7). In my writing practice, that which I have called

‘moves into silence’ can be described as two preliminary moves – the first away from the sound of external voices and the second toward relaxing the confused conversation of my interior monologue – while the third move is the type of practice Korzybski advocates for sanity. “Practicing silence focuses awareness on the dynamic nature of reality and away from dogmatic attachment to our beliefs and expectations. Such a focus breaks the emotional reaction we have when reality and expectations conflict” (in Reuter 2005, p. 435).

In recent years, psychotherapists have begun to encourage and teach the practice of silence for its benefits in treating anxiety, depression, and other debilitating conditions.<sup>9</sup> But the history of practicing silence stretches back in time across most, if not all, religious traditions, from the silence required for prayer and meditation to the vow of silence taken by those devoting their lives to contemplation. As psychologists and psychotherapists adapting the practice of silence for modern medicine would contend, one need not subscribe to a particular religion nor believe in a supreme being to practice silence and reap its benefits.<sup>10</sup> How, then, can we work to introduce the practice of silence into the community of inquiry?

### *III. How is silence to be discussed, valued and practiced?*

I will offer examples from my own teaching to suggest how silence might be valued and practiced in the classroom. I begin with a particular kind of circle talk. In my philosophy classes I attempt to encourage an inquiry approach to the readings I set and I draw from procedures advocated in the P4C literature in my effort to create a community of inquiry. Though I teach adults, I believe that the principles set out by P4C theorists for nurturing an inquiring community are applicable to people of all ages.<sup>11</sup> A basic aspect

of facilitating any conversation or discussion is the arrangement of the interlocutors, be they in a living-room or a classroom. Sitting and talking in a circle allows people to see and hear one another more easily. In the classroom, it helps the flow of talk if the teacher is not set apart at a podium or by standing while others sit. In order for people to share thoughts with a view towards equal and equitable expression, it helps to be *literally* on the same level. Though the appearance of equal access and equal status is an important and often necessary condition for establishing a community of inquiry, it is by no means sufficient to insure 'voice', as discussed earlier (ref. Li, 2001). Even the best possible arrangement of people in circle talk facilitated by a skilled teacher can degenerate into a battle of wills. A typical situation is that in which someone dominates conversation and others meet this resistance with defiant and/or protective silence. How is the teacher to proceed?

One of my strategies using silence is to politely but firmly take over control of the discussion, use my voice to soften the tone (if it had been strident or attacking), slow things down (if discussion had escalated into attack), and talk my way toward a comment that is likely to stop people and make them think. It may take the form of a question, though not necessarily, and, in any case, I put it out there using a tone that implies I am not expecting a response. And then I allow the question to sit there. I look at no one because I am pondering the comment or question myself. This may also happen at any time as part of my style of thinking aloud or when I sense a need for change in the tone or character of discussion; for example, people may simply be reiterating things they have said many times before and I sense that others are losing interest.

This may sound like an artificial or theatrical technique; but, when it happens I am seriously following my own train of thought to an end-point. A graduate student commented recently in my philosophy class on her own reaction at the beginning of the course the first time the discussion died down and I said nothing. At first she assumed someone had said or done something wrong, but then she realised that it was okay if no one talked. As one might imagine, my attempts to do what I have described and the ideal conditions for enacting it are two different things. Sometimes it does work and we are left just sitting there in silence. If and when everyone realizes that it is okay to be silent, we may even get beyond the gap of anxious expectation my student described as her first reaction. Thus far in my practice, this is as far as I have taken the process; such moments are few and fleeting. What I have learned from this inquiry into the value of silence is that I ought to call people's attention to silence, its effects for better or worse, and make it a regular topic of conversation, as Boler (2001) suggests. I am not inclined, however, to think that the best way of doing so would be for me, following the end of such as silence, to shift attention to it. Though once such a silence is broken, a student may well mention it, I tend to think it inappropriate for me to bring it up since this could imply that my actions were pre-planned rather than a spontaneous thinking out loud. How then to overtly introduce the practice of silence?

As I have said, circle talk in a community of inquiry is not immune from degenerating into a sparring match.<sup>12</sup> A process I use to interrupt the back-and-forth dynamic characteristic of competitive exchanges in classroom discussion is to pass a smooth and rather weighty beach stone to my left to be passed round the circle to each person in turn, in a fashion similar to the Mi'kmaw practice of passing the Talking

Stick.<sup>13</sup> I begin by explaining that each may talk or remain silent when holding the stone and may do so for an unspecified length of time, as he or she is moved to do. To hold the stone is to hold the silence. There is no requirement to speak or to keep the silence for all by retaining the stone, but each must respect the silence and the stone that represents it. I then pass the stone to my left.<sup>14</sup>

When I do this for the first time with a group, there is almost always some nervous laughter as the first person realizes that he or she is holding the stone. The idea that holding the stone is holding the silence of the group is not understood at first. Students tend to observe the usual conventions of talk they have been conditioned to expect: respond to what the previous person has said, try to carry the thread of conversation, stick to a topic, hold firmly in mind what one wants to say, and speak or politely and quickly pass the stone along. When it returns full-circle to me, I tend to hold the stone and silence, if no one has done so thus far.

Since this circle talk is taking place in a teacher-education classroom, a response that is often made and picked up by others is how this activity would work in a schoolroom. Classroom management and the dynamics of lesson planning is common language among my students and provide a convenient 'blind'. I sense that students feel it is an expected and safe topic that protects them from having to say anything particularly personal or risky. This teacher lingo may be silencing the more personal responses. Time, therefore, is needed to get past the first levels of discomfort caused by those gaps of expectation; but, eventually someone always makes a more personal comment and the talk may move to a different level.

The more gregarious people often comment on how difficult it is for them to wait to say what they want to say and that, once the stone has come to them, they have forgotten what they wanted to say, which is frustrating. Some ‘store up’ all of their comments and, when they finally hold the stone, list off and reply to each comment in turn, in a virtuoso display of memory. The quieter students will pass it immediately the first time and even the second time. I sense they feel pressure to speak even when the silence is theirs to hold. Holding the silence tends to be done by a gregarious person; someone used to attracting and capturing the attention of the group. The quiet people, when they do speak, often report on what it is like to prefer to be quiet; how they like to think things through before speaking and how this experience is a welcome one, since they can take their time and don’t have to compete with the quick responders.

My passing of the beach stone in a community of inquiry is a work in progress; however, it serves to introduce the concept and the practice of silence in my pluralist classroom.<sup>15</sup> Having had the chance to practice silence and discuss its value, students may be open to insights on the nature and value of silence drawn from religious traditions. Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century Mexican nun whose bishop attempted to silence her after she critiqued a sermon, wrote a reply in which she draws attention to her own silence and entreats her reader to “[h]ear me silent” (in Bokser 2006, p. 16). She writes that

although silence explains much by the emphasis of leaving all unexplained, because it is a negative thing, one must name the silence, so that what it signifies may be understood. Failing that, silence will say nothing, for that is its proper function: to say nothing. (Ibid, p. 15)<sup>16</sup>

Part of the reason we go astray in our efforts to bring students to ‘voice’, is because we mistakenly assume that silence is a void that needs filling. Caranfa (2004) says that

silence is the third party to a conversation (p. 220); language, on the other hand, “is empty and full of noise, as though the self is not part of it, does not create itself through it” (p. 222).

To learn about the practice of silence in a community of inquiry teachers may find instructive what Lippard (1988) refers to as the “participatory rhetoric” of the Quakers in which “no single perspective is imposed upon the group, rather a consensual multi-perspective is allowed to emerge” out of silence (p. 152). The Quakers, or Society of Friends, use no symbols, sacraments, sermons or liturgy in their meetings; but rather, they cultivate the “creative quiet” of silence (Jones 1937 in Ibid, p. 149), making it into a conscious habit through which attention can be “alternated between the particular object and its relationship to the whole” (Brinton 1952 in Ibid, p. 151). Sharp (2007) says that relational consciousness “allows children to enter an elusive place where consciousness overlaps and boundaries dissolve”. What better way to dispel the “illusion of separateness” (p. 251) in a community of inquiry than by acknowledging silence, the third party to our conversations. “When you are silent it speaks. When you speak it is silent” (Watts 1995, p. 50).

### *Conclusion*

It is clear that in our classrooms we must respect that which Covarrubias (2007) calls “culture-rich silence”; we may have students whose cultures already respect and practice silence, as do the Salish people whom Covarrubias describes.<sup>17</sup> Culture-rich silence may make us uncomfortable, especially if it appears to be defiant, self-protective, and proud. Yet, we need to do more than tolerate a silence we do not understand if we hope to discover the mutual interests necessary for realising Dewey’s vision of a

democratically constituted society. What I am suggesting is that we enrich pedagogical culture by acknowledging silence as a presence and “a fullness of opportunity for being and for learning” (Ibid, p. 269). Covarrubias claims that in any society there exist “contrasting cultural communication categories that exist in tension . . . to enact particular forms of communication.” In the case of silence, she suggests the terms ‘consumptive’ and ‘generative’. In consumptive silence, silence is addressed as a malfunction in human interaction and its enactors are seen as weak and disenfranchised.<sup>18</sup> In generative silence, silence is seen as creative and powerful with potential to affirm those present “personally, interpersonally, culturally, and even metaphysically” (p. 268). By recognizing and discussing the tension between these categories as they affect our lives and our efforts to inquire together in schools, we do have cause for hope. Following Schön’s (1983) influential work, schools of education have focused on educating reflective practitioners; however, the term ‘reflection’ is often understood and taught as a synonym for ‘analysis’ and ‘critique’. How can we teach to reflect and not consider silence? Li (2001) suggests we “examine the pedagogical merits of silence in facilitating ‘reflection in action’ and advises that silencing silence endorses speech as the privileged form of human communication (p. 158). There is no doubt, as Boler (2001) says, that speech in pedagogy will not be losing its place of prominence any time soon. Practicing silence may remind us of our blind spot just as reflection on and in silence has helped me see mine.

“ . . . and I was just being, and you were just being and that was okay”  
- Myrna DuMontier<sup>19</sup>

#### References

Alerby, E. & Elidottir, J. (2003) The Sounds of Silence: Some remarks on the value of silence in the process of reflection in relation to teaching and learning, *Reflective Practice* 4, 1, pp. 41-51.

- Buechner, F. (1977) *Telling the truth: the gospel as tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale* (San Francisco: Harper & Row).
- Dewey, J. (1944/1966) *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press).
- Glass, R.D. (2005) What is Democratic Education? in *Key Questions for Educators*, W. Hare & J.P. Portelli (eds.) (Halifax: Edphil Books) pp. 83-86.
- Jaworski, A. & Sachdev, I. (1998) Beliefs about Silence in the Classroom, *Language and Education* 12, 4, pp. 273-290.
- Jaworski, A. (1993) *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives* (Newbury Park: Sage).
- Kaufman, P. (2008) Gaining Voice through Silence, *Feminist Teacher* 18, 2.
- Kennedy, D. (1995) Philosophy for Children and School Reform, *Children, Philosophy and Democracy*, J.P. Portelli & R.F. Reed (eds.) (Calgary: Detselig) pp. 159-175.
- Koraybski, A. (1958) *Silence and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Lakeville, Conn: International Non-Aristotelian Library).
- Li, H. (2001) Silences and Silencing Silences, *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*, pp. 157-165.
- Lipman, M. (1995) Educating for Violence Reduction and Peace Development. The Philosophical Community of Inquiry Approach, in *Children, Philosophy and Democracy*, J.P. Portelli & R.F. Reed (eds.) (Calgary: Detselig) pp. 121-138.
- Martel, Y. (2007) I dare you, Mr. Harper, *The Globe and Mail*, 14 April.
- Ollin, R. (2004) Silence, Meanings and Learning, *International Journal of Learning* 11, pp. 441-447.
- Pardales, & Girod, M. (2006) Community of Inquiry: Its past and present future, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 38, 3, pp. 299-309.
- Petrovic, J.E. (2003) Can We Forget to Censor Silence? A Rejoinder to Applebaum, *Journal of Moral Education* 32, 2, pp. 163-166.
- Reuters, D. (2005) Silent Knights: Protecting Yourself with Silence, *ETC*, Oct, pp. 433-438.
- Sharp, A.M. (2004) And the Children Shall Lead, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18, 2, pp. 177-187.
- Sharp, A.M. (1991) The Community of Inquiry: Education for Democracy, *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children* 9, 2, pp. 31-37.
- Sontag, S. (1969) The Aesthetics of Silence, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux), pp. 3-35.
- Watts, A. (1955) *The Tao of Philosophy* (Boston: Tuttle).
- Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z. & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007) *The Mindful Way Through Depression* (New York: Guilford Press).

---

<sup>1</sup> The journal *Thinking* is produced by the Association for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (P4C). P4C was begun by Matthew Lipman when he realized that children were not learning because they were not being taught how to think.

<sup>2</sup> If the number of students is more than is conducive to circle talk, the group may be divided so that some students work on other tasks, alone or in small groups, while the teacher conducts circle talk with different groups in turn.

<sup>3</sup> In "John Cage," *American Masters* (The Music Project for Television Inc. and American Masters), 1990.

---

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘voice’ is placed in inverted commas to indicate that it does not necessarily refer to the actual sound of the human voice, but rather to the effective expression of intention and/or meaning, which may be conveyed without sound through a gesture, a mark, or a movement.

<sup>5</sup> In this situation the shout may well be that of ‘QUIET!’ but the intention in this power struggle is not to control sound so much as student ‘voice’ or agency.

<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to imagine a situation in which this tactic used in all seriousness would be advisable, with the exception of a situation where students were at imminent physical risk, as in a fire, for example. Under these circumstances, however, the tactic would be resorted to out of sincere concern for students, not from frustrated authoritarianism.

<sup>7</sup> Petrovic (2003) claims that teachers must censor their own silence if they do not speak up against homophobic remarks in their classrooms.

<sup>8</sup> There is not the space here to analyse in depth the nature and role of hesitancy; but, suffice to say that hesitation is a marker of doubt and a common response to a teacher’s prodding for response.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Williams, Teasdale, Segal & Jon Kabat-Zinn 2007.

<sup>10</sup> I would suggest, however, that a material realist may have a harder time with this practice than one open to the possibility that existence involves insoluble mysteries.

<sup>11</sup> It is not the purpose of this essay to recount these principles in detail, although in the introduction I indicate how they are grounded in concepts of the democratic classroom. For a detailed account of the principles and characteristics of a community of inquiry as conceptualized within P4C, see Lipman (1995), Sharp (1991 & 2004) and Kennedy (2001). For an excellent account of the history of the concept of community of inquiry, see Pardales & Girod (2006).

<sup>12</sup> In my experience teaching adults, this is most often a passive-aggressive contest and, though it pains me to admit it, I have been party to similar events in faculty meetings, an experience not uncommon in professional contexts when frustrations mount and participants allow them to affect the tone and dynamic of discussion.

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to First Nations peoples and my colleague, Jean Graveline, who conducted the two Talking Circles in which I have participated. I make no claim to be enacting this practice in the traditional way. I capitalize the phrase ‘Talking Stick’ when referring to it in relation to its traditional Mi’kmaw use and to indicate that I am not appropriating a cultural practice of which I have scant knowledge. Capitalisation of Talking Stick also follows Isabel Knockwood’s (1992) usage in *Out of the Depths*, in which she recounts how she was taught “the knowledge of many generations” of Mi’kmaq before she went to the Indian Residential School in Schubunacadie, Nova Scotia (p. 13).

<sup>14</sup> According to Knockwood (1992), the stick is passed to one’s left, following the sun’s direction (p. 7). I find this puzzling, since a path from east to west would only be perceived as moving from left to right if the viewer were facing south. Does this left-to-right orientation suggest that Mi’kmaq, viewing the sun in the Northern hemisphere, must face South to see its light at its lowest, in winter?

<sup>15</sup> For three simple but potentially profound exercises in practicing silence, see Reuter (2005) and for an exercise on silent discussion see Kaufman (2008).

<sup>16</sup> According to Bokser (2006), *La respuesta* is possibly the first feminist tract written in the New World (p. 7).

<sup>17</sup> She cites the description by Myrna DuMontier, a Salish woman, who recalls how, as a child in her grandmother’s house, she, her grandmother, and uncle sat in silence for two and a half hours with a visitor until the old man said, “Well, I’m going home”, got up and left. As she puts it, “that’s the world I grew up in” (in Covarrubias 2007, p. 265).

<sup>18</sup> She also says they are seen as static and ontologically unconfirmed.

<sup>19</sup> In Covarrubias 2007, p. 265