Silence as Indicator of Engagement

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A Question of What Gets Read

Student engagement is a significant predictor of student learning and achievement (Shernoff, 2013). If classroom engagement is the golden eagle, then its counterpart, silence, is the miner’s canary and lifts its voice in resistance to the seen and unseen lurking ahead. Like the miner’s canary, the silences that once pervaded my classroom warned of impending danger. Schein (1990) argued that a useful inquiry into an organization’s culture is possible when viewing it across “three fundamental levels at which it manifests itself: (a) observable artifacts, (b) values, and (c) basic underlying assumptions” (p. 111). When viewing the classroom from an organizational perspective, silence is transformed from a verb (causing to become silent) to a noun (the state of being silent). As such, classroom culture becomes that visible and observable target. To unlock students’ literacy learning, we must be open to reading artifacts of classroom culture and recognizing silences as engagement. Efforts to understand engagement have led to a consideration of its antithesis: “If a student is not engaged, then what are they?” (Trowler, 2010, p. 3). When students are not engaged, or in fact are disengaged, can their silence be an instrument of instruction?

Some time ago, I was teaching a literacy course designed to introduce students to the concept of literacy events. The underpinnings of the course were opportunities to tune their awareness to the situatedness of literacies and literacy tools. My goal was to engage them in learning through a process of questioning what gets read, who the reader is, and how members of classroom communities grapple with text, particularly texts which they deem disempowering (Majors, 2015). My perspective was such that learning, both in and out of school, is “as much about shifts in participation in social and cultural practices and activities as about shifts in ways of thinking (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1993, 2003)” (Nasir, 2012, p. 21).

Students were presented with a range of activities that drew on a critical literacy perspective. My hope was that such perspectives would inform their understanding of texts: what we identify as those meanings within texts, as well as what we, the readers, eventually make of those meanings. In addition to course readings and discussions, I presented my mostly white, female students with opportunities to observe high school classroom instruction. I wanted to enhance their learning experiences by exposing them to classroom discourses to draw on their observations with the theories that we were encountering.

Through my experiences as a woman teacher of color, I have encountered students who, for whatever reason, were unwilling to talk about their beliefs and values as emerging from a complex cultural landscape. I have often wondered as to the motivations for their silences in this regard, at times attributing such silences to a kind of passive attempt at othering the teacher. As one student anonymously stated in a course evaluation, “The only thing that she can do for me is sweep my floors.” At other times, I have thought that perhaps they are just not sure what they are supposed to say, or are afraid of the teacher or one another. Regardless of their motivations, the challenge for the educator is to read and unpack their assumptions, because no matter how painful, creating a space that allows for shifts in their thinking to occur is the job.

Such was the challenge in my classroom when my university students were given the opportunity to visit and observe literacy practices at the nearby high school, where I was also a language arts instructor conducting research. The goals for this visit/activity were to have university students use their observations to make sense of class readings. My vision was for a kind of engaged discourse, through which both groups of students practice literacies that help them understand what it means to be human (Majors & Lewis, 2017). What occurred instead was silence among my university students, who recoiled against my demand for consideration of how many of our social and institutional structures keep them from seeing the humanity within themselves (Baker-Bell, Butler, & Johnson, 2017), followed by masked excuses of many to not visit the school. Implicit in their stance was what I perceived to be a collective, unconscious sensibility that normalizes their familiar cultural experiences, against the backdrop and maintenance of a lesser known and/or opposing other (Tolle, 2005).
Taking Stock of Silence as Classroom Cultural Artifact

Many years later, I am taking stock of the silence in my classroom to ponder how it gave way to inertia rather than what is popularly considered engagement. Classroom discourse events are a kind of community of practice in which participants represent culture by evoking shared meanings and understandings through their performance and behaviors. Culture—what a group accumulates, learns, and shares over time—comprises all sorts of assumptions, ways of being and knowing, “that ha[ve] worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore ... is to be taught to new members as the ... correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1990, p. 111). If culture is the accumulated byproduct of teaching and learning, and discourse the medium by which agreement of what counts as culture is conveyed, then it must stand that talk is the coveted artifact of culture, and its counterpart, silence, the Holy Grail.

Rather than reflecting its intent to be a space where students could “think critically and develop the skills to formulate, document and justify their conclusions and generalizations” (Banks, 1998, p. 32), my classroom became a site of conflict, resistance, and silence. The artifact of such engagement, understanding, was displayed in some of the students’ written responses. For example, a handful of students who were able to move beyond their assumptions embraced the opportunity to visit my high school colleagues’ classrooms. Inherent in much of my students’ pre and post written work, however, was a lack of connection between what the teacher whom they observed did in terms of structuring the course design and student learning outcomes. In other words, engagement was conceptualized by the university students in terms of how the teacher they observed was emotionally involved with his or her students.

As one student described, the “White female high school teacher’s attitude” toward the high school students was “stern, but motherly.” Such an analysis illuminates what Thompson (2003) suggested is the moral convention of the white “innocent” woman—held as keeper and symbol of virtue, honesty, benevolence, and white middle class femininity. Innocent white femininity is often constructed in opposition to dangerous black masculinity. Whiteness symbolizes “good,” and such goodness codes within it superiority. Maternal feminism places white female teachers as keepers and spreaders of morality: missionaries, teachers, and reformers (of brown people), rescuing and studying brown people. Such “rituals of emotional expression” build on a moral identity inherent in the institutional view of equity-minded instruction and in consciousness raising, displays of empathy or care in the classroom. Empathy “implies that the problem belongs to women of color and requires only the sympathetic feelings of White women” (p. 44). Thus, rather than viewing instruction as an intellectual enterprise, for many of my university students, an important requirement for teaching was to care about the kids. The high school students’ receptivity of care, therefore, becomes the measure of learning and engagement.

In response to what I perceived to be students’ disinterest in visiting this particular high school, I decided to host a group of the high school students as visitors of my university class. I had hoped that the students might gain a sense of pride and agency through their engagement with college students on campus. One aspect of the activity was that each group would present the other with questions related to their respective identities as high school student or college student. Although I thought this a good idea at the time, the miner’s canary saw things differently as it watched from its perch on top of the lectern. Oblivious to its existence, I divided the entirety of my university class into five groups of three, and the visiting high school students made up a single group of five. I was excited, thrilled even, to see my envisionment of a town hall meeting coming to fruition. I believed strongly that “the usefulness of the knowledge we acquire and the effectiveness of the actions we take depend on the quality of the questions we ask” (Vogt, Brown, & Isaacs, 2003, p. 1). Therefore, each group was encouraged to collaboratively develop interview questions to guide, draw out, and enhance our understandings of one another’s experiences and perspectives. Several members of the undergraduate class volunteered to go first: “Have you ever seen a fight in class?” “What’s it like to live in a dangerous neighborhood?” “Do you think it makes a difference to come from a single-family home?” “Do you like music?” “Do you think you’ll graduate, and if so, what will you do after that?”

With a stern side-eye, the miner’s canary declared, “I told you so,” before flying out the open classroom window, taking with it any hopes that I had had of an instructional win. What is more important here is the university students’ engagement. For example, one by one, the young adult college students eagerly offered up questions, which as one high school student stated, mirrored the persistent stereotyping that they had unfortunately come to expect of all people outside of their community. The fact that such questions were coming directly from future teachers, however, left them with
From Silence to Probing

What can be learned from students’ silences to understand engagement? I would argue that an inquiry into a classroom’s culture may be useful for assessing, analyzing, and perhaps breaking such silences. Schein’s (1990) theory of organizational culture is helpful in this regard when viewing classroom engagement across “three fundamental levels at which it manifests itself: (a) observable artifacts, (b) values, and (c) basic underlying assumptions” (p. 111). When viewing the engagement from this perspective, silence is transformed from a verb (causing to become silent) to a noun (the state of being silent) and, as such, becomes that visible and observable target of my focus and analysis. In acknowledging the silence that permeated my classroom and labeling it an artifact of its culture, I move closer to understanding its meanings, its utility, and better yet, a pedagogical strategy that would enable me to disrupt and transform it.

According to Schein (1990), however, the problem with artifacts is that they are palpable but hard to decipher accurately. Taken in isolation, cultural artifacts are especially problematic in this regard because the lesson [meaning of the artifact] is not clear if one does not understand the underlying assumptions behind it. (p. 112)

To identify those cultural meanings that insiders attach to artifacts, Schein (1990) recommended a kind of collective probing, one that digs deeper into the meanings attributed to relevant artifacts in a way that enables their underlying values, philosophies, objectives, epistemologies, and ideologies to come to light. Ideally, if I had organized follow-up writing and discussion to allow the underlying values, philosophies, objectives, and epistemologies of students to be released rather than repressed, student engagement would have had a greater opportunity for success in my classroom, unpacking, disrupting, and shifting silences along the way.