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Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Paul (2007). "Observing Silence," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/papers/4>

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Observing Silence

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Abstract: The interpretation of silence depends on meanings that are negotiated in a particular social and cultural location, or place and space. Silence is an under-theorized and under-researched aspect of adult learning. The complexities and salience of silence in teaching and learning, methodological issues around observing and researching silence are explored.

Theoretical Framework

The ambiguity in the title of the paper is deliberate. The phrase ‘observing silence’ has a particular cultural meaning. In some parts of the world ‘observing silence’ has a ritualistic, even theological or spiritual set of meanings. The range of meanings is diverse. For example, a positive view is that silence ‘is golden’, referring to the retreatist, contemplative, restorative function of experiencing silence. In other contexts, silence takes on more negative connotations. For example, the sense in which silence is used as punishment (solitary isolation), demanding students sit in silence, with fingers on their lips. More neutral sets of meanings link silence to language. It may shape sequences of speech. Further, it can differentiate between units of speech, whilst determining their length. Invariably, silence connotes meanings which are interpreted not as empty, but *full* of meaning. This openness of interpretation is a key focus of this paper. The semantics of silence are culturally constructed: silence can mean both anything (semantically) and nothing (syntactically) (Schmitz, 1994). There is also a sense of silence having a rhetorical effect (Glenn, 2004). More specific is the sense of silence as linked to secrecy, in terms of what is *not* being said. This links to more explicitly political and ideological meanings (Freire, 1972; Rapp, 2002), and to the idea of silence as a way of knowing (Belenky et al, 1986).

Methodologically, observing silence poses a range of difficulties not only about defining what constitutes silence and how it might be measured or recorded, but there are issues about its interpretation in the teaching and learning context. The limited literature that makes reference to silence in teaching and learning may be divided broadly into those that see silence has having positive connotations – where silence is a salient part of the learning process – and negative connotations, where ‘cultures of silence’ (Freire) can be identified which actively discourage participation, and fail to give voice to excluded groups. The theoretical perspective taken in this research is one of critical theory combined with a constructivist view that situates learning in both its social and cultural context, and therefore is more interested in the sources of legitimacy for keeping learners quiet, or for actively encouraging them to speak their voice. This reflects the largely unquestioned axiom that if learning is to be effective, students should actively participate in learning through talk.

Problematizing Talk

I am undertaking a three year project - *Investigating Cultures of Learning in Higher Education* - now into its second year. During the first year, the observation of a range of teaching and learning contexts have been recorded and analysed. The first phase of analysis identified the significance of location, and this was the theme of a paper presented at the 47th AERC Annual Conference (Armstrong, 2006a). The process of data analysis led to a reconceptualization of the methodology which problematized observation itself. The process of observation was reset in its anthropological traditions, and this meta-research issue provided insights into the possibility that underpinning the processes of observation was *semiosis*. What underlies the practice of observation is not 'subjectivity', but a Bourdiean notion of disposition towards decoding meanings of classroom talk and other signs and symbols in a culturally limited habitus. Among the research questions that the project is seeking to answer are a set to do with observed silence in the classroom: what are the meanings of silence that can be identified in classroom settings? What assumptions are being made about the nature of silence? Does silence necessarily reflect passive rather than active learning? Or, does silence indicate that no learning is going on at all? Does silence *inhibit* democratic dialogue? Or, does silence *inhabit* processes of learning?

It became evident through the research that cultural construction of the meanings of silence was salient. Ennigner (1991), for example, provides a detailed analysis of silence across cultures, using semiotics to look at what silence signifies, and what are its signifiers. Within education, similar analyses have focused on cultural differences between 'eastern' and 'southern' educational experiences. Nakane (2002, 2006), for example, examined the silence of Japanese students in Australian university classrooms. Through interviews it appears that the silences observed were not merely due to difficulties of adapting to Australian norms of classroom interaction and the idea of turn-taking, but directed by an ethical position of showing respect and politeness. Zhou et al (2005), studying Chinese students in Canadian universities, argued that the supposed passivity and reticence of East Asian learners was a myth; instead the research focused on that strategic value of silence in avoiding awkwardness associated with disagreement, and maintaining harmonious relationships: 'Educated by the Confucian pedagogies, Chinese students preferred didactic and teacher-centred style of teaching and would show great respect for the wisdom and knowledge of their teachers' (Zhou et al, 2005, 288). Sifianou (1997) has investigated 'the complex nature of silence' and its 'inherent ambiguity', from which a similar focus on the strategic value of politeness emerged, confirming the views of Brown and Levinson (1987) that silence is the 'ultimate expression of politeness'. Sifianou argues that looking at silence cross-culturally it is essential to understand the predominant cultural values toward silence itself, and its cultural construction. It is not merely a question of cultural difference and diversity, but an understanding of the classroom processes and interactions that contribute to the active construction of the meanings of silence in its classroom context. Plank (1994) for example in studying the education of Native American children was interested in how teachers made sense of the Navajo use of silence in communication, and talked about the teachers' discomfort. This seems to be a common theme in research on silence in the classroom. Boler's (2004) edited collection is organized around the notion of silence as 'disturbing'. In reviewing Bosacki's (2005) *The Culture of Classroom Silence*, Shiza (2005) talks about silence as

'frustrating and disconcerting', and the students' 'withdrawal, fear of engaging in dialogue or reluctance to contribute to discussion and enquiry'. Copenhaver (2000, 8) similarly talks about the 'discomfort that fosters silence'. In short, silence is seen as a problem, as a barrier to participation and thereby learning. This assumption is the starting point of Gimenez's (1989, 184) concern that she fails to conquer the 'silent classroom' and students' apparent unwillingness to engage in critical thinking. In a rejoinder, Wright (1989, 194) agrees with Gimenez's analysis of the 'problem of silence in the classroom', but is 'a good deal more sanguine about the possibilities for change'. Drawing on Giddens's (1984) idea of 'structuration', Wright contends that 'the various structures which contribute to silence in the classroom are reproduced largely through everyday interaction within the classroom (p.194). But he still sees silence as a problem; he does not show an appreciation of alternative cultural meanings of silence as constructed through the classroom processes of interaction.

As a teacher of adults, silence in the classroom is rarely a problem', although I am not sure that I could argue as strongly as Caranfa (2004) that silence is the 'foundation of learning', though I do agree with him that the relationship between silence and learning needs more critical research. Whilst there is an 'abundance of empirical data', they are 'permeated by a deep underlying flaw: they exclude silence dialogical pedagogies on which they are based' (Caranfa, 2004, 211). In a more recent publication, Caranfa points to the neglect of both feelings and silence in the reflective or critical thinking process and talks about the value of a pedagogy of an 'aesthetic of silence' (Caranfa, 2006, 86).

Measuring Silence in the Classroom

The real question is how can we investigate silence in the classroom? The positivist approach has always assumed that silence can be identified and measured. Yet, this is deeply dissatisfying and fraught with problems. A classic example of an attempt to quantify silence is Flanders' Interaction Analysis Categories (FIAC). that has been well used in recording classroom observations, where the tenth category is 'silence and confusion'. Interestingly, whilst there have been many critiques of FIAC, none, it seems, have focused on its limitations in failing to distinguish silence from confusion. What is of concern is that when such categorisations are employed to measure performance or 'successful teaching' in the classroom, when 'communication cannot be understood by the observer', and therefore might jump to negative conclusions about classroom management and the lack of evidence of learning taking place. In a review of the methodology and its application to Problem-Based Learning, Newman (2001) states that Flanders established a norm using his schedule: 80% classes are teacher talk, 20% are student talk, and 11-12% silence (and confusion). In some ways, this merely reflects the fact that seven of the ten categories focus on teacher-talk, two of the ten are focused on student talk, and the remaining one is silence and confusion. Newman does not explain why the norm adds up to more than 100%, but it probably reflects the complexity of classroom interaction with more than one observable thing going on at one time, and FIAC can only measure by simplifying. More importantly, it is unable to measure the unobservable. Jaworski and Sachdev (1998, 273) consider it necessary to use questionnaire methodology to elicit beliefs and attitudes about silence, to complement existing ethnographic research because attempts to understand silence using ethnographic research alone, drawing on discourse or narrative analysis fail to provide systematic measurement of silence. Why we should want to measure silence is not questioned.

Observing Silence

Qualitative ethnographic methodologies characterise more recent research on silence. Nakane (2006) uses semi-structured interviews together with audio and video recordings of classroom interaction, which have been transcribed, providing data for discussing the significance of culture on understanding of silence in the classroom. Zhou et al. (2005, 309) undertake a phenomenological study for three specified reasons. First, this approach

attempts to understand an empirical matter or phenomenon (e.g. students' classroom experiences) from the perspective of those who experienced them. Second, the approach aims to explore the subjective meaning of the lived experiences. Third, the approach provides an approach to examining experience in a way not constrained by researcher preconceptions.

This approach privileges silence. There is a prior methodological question to ask about the observation of silence, which is why researchers were struck by the salience of silence in the first place, in order to do this follow up ethnographic work, exploring beyond the observation of silence. In examining my own qualitative data derived from observing classrooms, the salience of silence came to the foreground. To begin with, silence was not an obvious feature of the observations. The focus was on what was observed to be happening, rather than on what was *not* happening. Hence, the focus on context, place and space emerged as significant. However, re-reading the audiovisual data from a range of perspectives the salience of silence began to appear. In looking at the audiovisual data from a teacher trainer perspective, the connotation of silence provided a distinct set of meanings about how we could know learning was taking place without being able to observe the learning itself. Looking at the data from a workplace supervisor role, there were a different set of meanings emerging: for example, I wanted to discuss with the class tutor how they 'managed' silence. The silence would have been problematized, either because the tutor filled silent spaces with which they were uncomfortable, or they actively employed silence to reinforce or consolidate learning through a reflective process. I then considered the observational data from a third perspective – that of inspector or evaluator – and considered what interpretation or 'value' I might place on 'silence' in class, particularly where the tutor demanded silence from her students as a means of conformity, an exercise of power, demonstrating classroom management skills. In short, the meanings of silence are crucial to understanding its significance, and are imposed upon data recorded through the processes of observation.

The Semiotics of Silence

My experience of critically examining the observational process raised what appeared to be some traditional criticisms about observational methods: selectivity, subjectivity, partiality. Yet, these were not personal, but cultural. In short, we are brought back to the anthropologists' problem of making sense of the world that may not be their own. I realised that these were questions about the very process of observation itself, and that this was a semiotic process. In a previous conference paper (Armstrong, 2006b), I have argued for a critical semiosis. In other words, a recognition that observation is not an haphazard random process, but is ordered and predictable, made possible by communication through signs and codes, which have cultural – and sometimes –

intercultural - shared meanings and interpretations. Whilst this may appear to be obvious, it requires us to bring together the two great traditions of anthropology, based around what Giddens (1984) has called structure and agency. Structural anthropology, stemming from the work of Levi-Strauss, assumes a holistic approach – no part can be understood separately from the whole, and seeking *explanation*. Meaning structures are resident in language and constrain cognition. More humanistic perspectives focus on the interactions between human beings, stressing agency and seeking *understanding*. Meanings, including the language we use to talk about meanings, are socially and culturally constructed. Within these two broad traditions of anthropology, the former developed a semiotic approach to understanding societies and cultures; the latter developed participant observation techniques for making sense of the world. Perhaps, in these post-structural times, the two traditions can be brought together – the symbiosis of semiosis?

Silence provides an opportunity to test out the feasibility of bringing the two traditions together. Most of the research undertaken on silence in the social sciences has stemmed from ethnographic approaches. However, as those qualitative techniques have visited (and revisited) discourse and narrative analysis, borrowing ideas from the cultural analyses of literature, art and other creative products, there is an inevitable drift towards semiotics. With the exception of Enninger (1991), there is as yet very little to be found in English language publications on the semiotics of silence in education. However, we need to be prepared to cross disciplinary boundaries (Achino-Loeb, 2006; Caranfa, 2006; Jaworski 1997).

A semiotics of silence in the classroom would focus on the decoding of signs and signifiers of silence. A starting point might well be the absence of sound. For example, there may be no aural response to a teacher's spoken question. However, the response may be visual such as shaking of the head, breaking of eye contact between teacher and student, or other behavioural responses which generate sound such as writing or drawing on paper or a board, or the movement of a mouse or typing on a keyboard. A semiotic approach would contrast silence and speech; there might be the application of pragmatic tools such as conversational analysis. A model could be presented which attempts to explain the observer's cognitive competence, and its limits, in being able to interpret the silent answer. A basic distinction may also be made between intentional silence (the refusal to answer) and non-intentional silence (the psychological inability to answer). The interpretation of silence could be extended to an analysis of various discourse types. For example, in the legal world of some cultures, there is a right of silence for both the accused and the witness; there may be the legal right of authorities to silence the broadcasting or reporting of direct speech, which may have relevance to the classroom, as a microcosm of the wider culture. Unfortunately, there is no space here to provide evidence from a semiotic analysis; this will have to be provided during the conference session.

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