

Blog post

Educators' approach to 'silence' and 'listening differently'

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Introduction

Educators, at times, encounter situations when they ask students questions after teaching, only to be met with silence, or when they assign group exercises or activities and students do not respond to their instructions for what feels like an extended period. These moments of silence can be discouraging; however, it is crucial to recognise that silence does not necessarily indicate students' disinterest or lack of understanding or participation. The reasons why students remain silent in the classroom are multifaceted. Some students may not feel comfortable expressing themselves verbally in a classroom setting, while others may have low confidence or struggle with non-native English proficiency. Additionally, some students may have difficulty making sense of the instruction or task, or need more time to think (Ollin, 2008). All these factors can contribute to a lack of student engagement and active participation in class activities and necessitate a different approach to listening and interpreting the meaning conveyed in silence (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Listening differently and enabling classroom activities that recognise that voice can take different forms

Student disengagement can manifest in various ways, and one prominent indication is the absence of response, which holds particular significance in classroom activities that prioritise verbal communication. Silence becomes problematic when it is misconstrued as disengagement or a lack of participation.

Adopting a different way of listening can revolutionise the classroom learning environment, especially incorporating written and visual mediums into learning activities. Interactive tools and learning technologies, such as Padlet, Mentimeter, Kahoot, Microsoft Teams and

students' silence allows the educator to respond appropriately, as silence can have different interpretations, such as students being tired if the session is the last session of the day, students going through challenges, needing more time to process information or having not understood the task.

Shifting power from the educator to student is an important aspect of understanding students' needs and the tools appropriate to listening (Cook-Sather, 2018; Wright, 2011). For example, rather than the educator determining when students respond, they could utilise tools, such as Microsoft Teams chat or Padlet, for students to respond and contribute to discussions during and after sessions.

Embracing other non-verbal communication, such as artistic creations, provide students who prefer visual methods of expressing themselves to communicate their ideas in a way that resonates with their unique strengths. Non-verbal communication also acknowledges the power of body language, facial expressions and gestures, which all need to be understood by the educator and responded to accordingly. By recognising the value of listening differently, educators can help create an environment where students can thrive (hooks, 1989).

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How can educators listen differently?

1. Interrogating self and practice:

This involves educators examining their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours and reflecting on biases and assumptions about different

ways of communicating. Reflexivity is also important in interrogating self as self-reflection should yield change (Antonacopoulou, 2006).

2. Incorporating lessons learned from Covid-19 and embracing using resources such as Padlets, Microsoft Teams and other virtual platforms with students:

Students can post their opinion, questions and answers to the chat, use emojis and vote for answers that resonate with them.

3. Balancing cultural interpretations, cultural learning and learning differences in interpretation of silence and its response:

Culture in conversation, as emphasised by hooks (2003), recognises that individuals bring their unique cultural lenses to the classroom, influencing how they interpret and engage with content and activities. Therefore, educators should reflect on how to bridge the connection between students to create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

4. Embrace wait time: When asking questions or assigning tasks, allow sufficient wait time for students to process and formulate their answers.

participating. Embrace the power of silence as students gather their thoughts and find the courage to speak up.

5. Learning space dynamics and how it can signal students to be ready for discussions and interactions.

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