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Women Learners in the Classroom: Exploring the Experience of Voice, Listening, and Silence

By Anita Sinner,¹

Abstract

The question of voice is central to a feminist perspective. The dichotomies of voice and silence have long held positions of power and marginalization in the context of the classroom community. In a recent investigation into the learning experiences of three women, Giustina, Tina and Christina, the theme of voice, listening, and silence surfaced as participants reflected on their participation in college and university courses in Canada. These case studies offer a forum to discuss the classroom experiences of women and perhaps shift perspectives on the meaning of voice, listening, and silence in learning.

Key Words: women in the classroom, adult education, Canadian education.

Introduction

The question of voice is central to a feminist perspective. The dichotomies of voice and silence have long held positions of power and marginalization in the context of the classroom community. But there is a growing debate in the academic literature focusing on the interrelationship of voice, listening and silence in the classroom. Voice cannot exist in a cacophony of talk; voice can only exist when others listen, and most importantly, when others remain silent within a community of learners. It is in the spaces between talk, between voices being heard, where listening and silence become the integral links, encouraging self-reflection and self-talk. The interplay of voice, listening and silence then facilitates the construction of new ideas within a group setting.

In a qualitative study about the learning experiences of three women, Giustina, Tina and Christina, the theme of voice, listening and silence surfaced as each woman reflected on her participation in college and university courses in Canada. During in-depth conversations, the women spoke about how they engaged in the classroom environment, the role of community in the social construction of thought, and how these skills then guided them in taking action within their lifeworlds. While each woman spoke from a different perspective, all participants highlighted the importance of speaking, listening, and silence in their classroom encounters. These case studies offer insights from lived experiences that help inform the theoretical discussion and shift perspectives on the meaning of voice, listening, and silence in learning.

Methods

This research project employs case studies and is framed by two key concepts: diversity of experience and women's talk.

Specific criteria for this project required that participants were women who had returned to learning and taken college/university courses or upgrading courses, and that participants were not known each other. Because individual diversity is critical to understanding learning from a feminist perspective, a sampling strategy of "maximum variation" was adopted to help identify commonly shared patterns among participants with different backgrounds (Creswell, 1998, p. 119). The greater the diversity among participants, including factors of age, levels of education,

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and fields of study, the more likely key concepts emerge and the greater the potential to contribute to a theoretical discussion.

Canvassing regional post-secondary institutions for potential participants quickly generated a list of ten candidates. Of those who met the criteria, three women agreed to be part of this project (see Table 1). Although this sampling strategy is small and not representative of a wider population, these three comprehensive case studies have “built in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test theory and explanation” (Mason, 1993, p. 94).

Participants resided in different geographic locations and selected their own pseudonyms for this project. Individual interviews ranged from two hours to three and a half hours. By engaging in conversational interviews, the stories of participants’ experiences of learning unfolded easily. Although interviews followed a loosely defined question and answer format, significant portions of the interviews took a narrative form. These life-story segues were rich in depth and scope, making first person accounts the data for this project. It is through small-size sampling such as this that the quality and intimacy of women’s talk, a medium of knowledge construction and generation, is best demonstrated.

Through the sharing of life stories, a number of themes were generated, and voice, listening and silence emerged as a central theme shared by all participants in this research project. The life stories of participants are rooted in autobiographical memory, one of many forms of memory that defines the learning experience. Randall states, “autobiographical memory is a kind of super-memory ... inclusive of all our memories” (1997, p. 215). Autobiographical memory is the foundation upon which identity and knowledge are defined. Memory “is not a record of our outside story, but the pearl (however in the rough) that we fashion from our past on the inside. It is not about existence but about experience” (Randall, 1997, p. 218). Life stories evolve based on “what to keep and what to cull, and how to construct what is kept” (Randall, 1997, p. 217). It is this ongoing act of composing a life that serves to inform the every day events of life and living (Bateson, 1989). And it is through such life stories that educators “gain insight in the lives of particular students in order to understand them or help them” (van Manen, 1998, p. 71). By sharing experiences, women are, as Riessman states, “revealing truths”, and in the process women inform the feminist standpoint through the meaning and interpretation of their individual experiences (Riessman, 1993, p. 22).

Case studies: Participant’s experiences of voice, listening, and silence

The first person accounts of Giustina, Tina, and Christina highlight the importance of voice, listening, and silence in their classroom experiences, and reveal how some women engage in learning.

Giustina

Giustina, 55, is an immigrant to Canada and has lived a more traditional lifestyle, raising her children and remaining home most of her adult life. Giustina originally entered post-secondary learning prior to the second wave of the feminist movement, returning only recently to formal learning. As a learner, Giustina expresses an ‘old world’ sensibility, preferring to observe how to, rather than read lengthy texts. Returning to learning nearly forty years after leaving Italy, Giustina relies on her independence of thought to steer her in the right direction. Her first experience as a student in a Canadian school began when her learning journey took her to the local college, where she enrolled in English as a Second Language. Later Giustina studied Adult Basic Education and Business Administration, and after several years, she obtained her diploma. Giustina spoke about the role of voice when reflecting on her experience in the classroom:

I'm the kind that sits back, listens to people. They ask questions and I think about the questions. I get more that way than by asking questions. I like to hear what they have to say. I share my ideas about how I feel. They [other students] always want to listen to me. I think they like my stories!

Tina

Tina, 47, has remained in the geographic region of her birth throughout her life. She has experienced repeated phases of working and being at home due to ongoing health concerns. Tina entered post-secondary learning as the feminist movement emerged in the early 1970s and returned to learning once her children were independent. Tina prefers to learn visually and through hands-on activities, and expressed a desire to try many fields of study. Over a decade ago, Tina obtained her high school equivalency and then enrolled in a business program at the local college. When she spoke of her learning experiences, Tina noted how effective individual courses have been in the context of her personal life and the contribution that learning has made to her employment as an art coordinator for a prominent magazine. Tina described participation in the classroom pragmatically:

The courses I took along the way have helped me immensely. I took Marketing and learned computer skills. I didn't have any problems speaking out, but quite often, I pick up more from listening, than if I speak. We have two ears and only one mouth for a reason. I had no problem with that [speaking out in the classroom] although I listened much more than I spoke. I did prefer to be silent.

Christina

Christina, 34, began post-secondary studies in the 1980s when feminism was well integrated into the fabric of North American society. Christina is a communicator, learning by sound, by talking, by conversing and listening. She attended college and university after high school and eventually completed a degree in music. As a tactile learner, Christina is active and participatory, skills ideally suited for her profession as an opera singer. She now travels extensively as a stage performer. Christina highlighted the challenging role of engaging voice many women experience at the post-secondary level:

I liked being the class clown. I would ask a lot of questions, but I was actually extremely shy about expressing my own ideas about things. Almost to the point where I would frustrate myself, because somebody else would say it, and I would think, 'Oh no, no, that's dumb' or 'That's too personal'. And then the teacher would say, 'Oh, gosh, that's insightful'. People don't believe me when I say I'm shy. Yeah, I would blurt out and entertain the class, I'm still like that. I still like to be the entertainer.

Exploring voice, listening and silence

While Giustina, Tina and Christina have diverse backgrounds and learning experiences, they share a common and critical theme: Each indicated a preference not to occupy the centre of discussions in their learning environments. The experiences described by the participants serve as evidence of the complex and sophisticated nature of women's communication. They view voice, listening and silence as turn-taking opportunities, forms of cooperation within communities of learners. This implies a transformative quality to voice, listening and silence as a learning tool in the classroom.

In the cases of Giustina, Tina and Christina, descriptions of the nature of exchange in classrooms may be reflective of their status as mature learners. They did not mention the kinds of challenges that younger women may experience, such as feelings of intimidation in the classroom. It must also be noted that cultural norms, values, and social expectations of women can dramatically impact individual experiences of classroom learning. As Hayes (2001) states:

If a social norm dictates that “self-assertiveness” is inappropriate for women, one female student might choose to be quiet or self-deprecating in order to maintain her “feminine” identity, though these behaviors might raise questions about her academic ability. Another woman might choose to be more assertive, risking negative judgments about her femininity in favor of expressing her knowledge and confidence. In each case, gender affects both behavior and its outcomes. (p. 39)

Although Giustina, Tina and Christina did not specifically refer to the dynamics of gender in their learning experiences, issues of power and marginalization cannot be overlooked. The role of gender in the classroom further impacts, and sometimes defines, women’s experiences of voice, listening, and silence. Weiss (2001) states:

Although men don't necessarily dominate a classroom in terms of talking time, they're often perceived as having more power and knowledge. When men talk, people tend to pay more attention ... Examples of discrimination persist in adult education--such as calling directly on men students but not on women, responding more fully to men's comments than to women's, and interrupting women students more often. (p. 46)

While the classroom experiences of Giustina, Tina and Christina inform our discussion of voice, listening, and silence, these case studies are clearly not representative of all women’s learning experiences, particularly traditional age women students whose concerns over social relationships with male students outside the classroom may influence their patterns of communication within it.

Dimensions of Learning

All participants spoke about forms of engagement in the classroom, noting the importance of speaking, listening, and silence. This implies that individual learning styles serve as an opening to help learners “gain some basic understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as learners” (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 220). As Bauer and Shea state:

Learners vary from each other in three ways. First, learners vary in the ways and rates at which they learn ... Second, learners ... differ in ways in which they interact with teachers and peers ... Third, learners vary in the ways in which they gain access to the environment and to information in the environment. (1999, p. 169)

Giustina, Tina and Christina demonstrate that adult learners often adopt multiple learning styles depending on the classroom environment, which in part, shapes and reshapes perceptions of self in the process. Self-identity in the classroom is reflective of the changing roles women experience in the course of their lives, and in a profile of participants, their individual diversity may offer some insight into their methods of engagement in the classroom.

As lifelong learners, all participants entered post-secondary learning at different ages during adulthood, sometimes returning to learning on several occasions (see Table 1). All

participants completed high school and attended college. Only Christina attended university. While Giustina and Tina both studied Business Administration, and Christina studied Music, their future educational interests focus on different fields of study. Giustina would like to study counselling, Tina plans to pursue studies in the fine arts, and Christina will focus on voice training. From a perspective of individual diversity, participants represent three generations of women; as well as women who are married, divorced, or not married; women who have children, or not; and women of different cultural backgrounds. All factors impact how each woman engages in everyday experiences like the classroom environment. Given that everyday experiences are a valid form of knowing, these case studies offer an opportunity to engage in an exploration of the key tenets of voice, listening, and silence.

The Literature

In the seminal text, *“Women’s Ways of Knowing”*, the question of voice, listening and silence is central to understanding women’s ways of “gaining a voice” in the public world and of women’s self-concepts, “embedded in a larger context of feminist theory about voice and silence” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 19). The notion that “the silent women lived cut off from others” and “they do not cultivate their capacities for representational thought” is open to debate (Belenky, et al., 1997, p. 25). In Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule’s (1997) five categories of women’s ways of knowing, silent women represent the lowest order of knowers. Listeners, defined as women who receive knowledge from others, hold the second lowest ranking, while women with voice represent the highest order of knowing. Although Belenky et al. (1997) contribute significantly to understanding women’s experiences of learning, this characterization of women is questionable. Silent women and women with voice emerge in all learning environments, at all levels of learning. Verducci argues it is important to “dispel the illusion of perceiving concepts and practices such as silence and talk as oppositional ... [for] ... silence can be expressive” (2000, p. 534). It is within this context that the relationship between voice, listening and silence may be explored based on the insights provided by Giustina, Tina and Christina.

Some contemporary discussions to consider

There is a growing debate in the academic literature focusing on the roles of voice, listening and silence in the classroom. Luke states:

In feminist theory the concept and practice of voice ... has always been counterposed to silence. The concept of voice as a means of empowerment for women has been a key element in feminist theory and practice since the beginning of the women’s movement in the 1960s. (1994, p. 211)

Verducci echoes Luke, stating, “silence and talk create social reality ... challenging traditional feminist views of ... marginalization and inclusion ... who speaks and how they speak” (2000, p. 533). According to Verducci, “good language is caring and marked by a readiness to listen and pay attention, an invitation to others to speak, and a positive valuing of the contributions of others” (2000, p. 534). Silence is an equal partner with listening and voice. Voice, listening and silence are forms of communication that are negotiated by sharing time and space. Only through active listening, and therefore silence, can we develop quality speech. Silence is a form of respect among learners, and in itself, a form of speaking. Luke suggests the politics of silence in the classroom have been overlooked:

The use of silence as a politics of resistance ... [that] ... can be read as a refusal to confess and to expose the self ... an analysis of who makes differential use of speech and silence and in what discursive and institutional contexts, might move us towards a better understanding of how women negotiate public speech contexts which can help us reconstruct our pedagogical strategies. (1994, p. 213)

As a political tool to “subvert and resist”, women are engaging in feminist acts by using silence as “a refusal of patriarchy” (Luke, 1994, p. 214 & 222). Silence is “understood as an avenue of power”, taking on a social role of resistance of authority and control, which symbolizes the empowerment of alternative thought (Mahoney, 1996, p. 603). Owen highlights the importance of examining the spaces in-between, for “silences ... left behind are rich resources for thought, reflection and renewed commitment” (1997, p. 481). Silence is not necessarily an indication of a lack of generative knowledge as Belenky et al. (1997) state, nor does listening necessarily imply disengagement or even angst. Voice, listening and silence are all forms of autonomy. Participants in this research project have articulated that silence and voice, with listening in between, are viewed as equal components of engagement in the learning environment, which must be acknowledged, respected and practiced to have effective sharing in the classroom.

Beginning the Dialogue

The traditional feminist perspective on the importance and role of voice in a woman's self-definition is beginning to shift to include the complex nature of how women engage in the public sphere. There is an interrelationship of voice, listening and silence in the classroom that guides women's communication. Women effectively engage in all three states of being as learners. The contributions of learners like Giustina, Tina and Christina help move this discussion forward, informing practice and encouraging a new perspective on dialogue. As the creation of knowledge is rooted in the essence of day-to-day experiences, perhaps it is the fluid movement between all forms of engagement that facilitates learning in a constructive and meaningful manner for women in the classroom. Every woman's story of learning offers a piece of a greater whole, and from a feminist standpoint, the experiences of individual women, like Giustina, Tina and Christina, serve as an opening to discuss classroom experiences and perhaps offer an opportunity to shift perspectives on the traditional understanding of voice, listening, and silence in learning.

Table 1 *Demographic profile of participants*

DEMOGRAPHICS	Giustina	Tina	Christina
Birth year	1946	1954	1967
Age at time of interview	55	47	34
Marital status	Married	Divorced, Remarried	Not married
When married	1965	1972, 1989	—
Children	3	2	0
Cultural Background	Italian	Second generation Canadian	Canadian
High School	Yes	Yes	Yes
College	Yes	Yes	Yes
University	No	No	Yes
Area of study	Business Administration	Business Administration	Music
Years engaged in formal post- secondary learning	1962, 1999 – present	1971, 1988-94	1985-1990, 1995-1997
Educational plans for the future	Counselling	Fine arts	Voice training

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