

The ~~Problem~~ with Silent Students – *it's you, not them*

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The “problem”

“Fourth-year history courses are often billed as seminars, where participation can be worth a whopping 40 per cent. In our educational system, silent students pay a heavy academic price indeed.”

“Online discussion allows quieter students to contribute to course debates.”

“The more quiet students you have, the less dynamic your session will be.”

“Tactics to draw quiet students in:

- Invite them to summarize conflicting points of view or positions taken by others. This offers a relatively low-risk opportunity to talk.
- Ask if they understand what someone else just said.
- At the end of a class, ask the quiet students which other students helped them with the biggest impact on their learning that day.”

“At the time I thought (class participation marks) were BS, but now as a teacher, I see the value of it. It forces students to read the material and come prepared to articulate their thoughts ... this is when real learning can take place, ...”

The root of the ~~problem~~

- Pedagogy
 - Active learning, social constructivism
 - In practice: doing, discussing
 - Talking = learning
 - Disciplinary pedagogies – Socratic method, debate, case study
- Culture and society
 - Sound bites, tweets
 - Being shy or introverted are no longer acceptable personality traits – outgoing, extroverted, gregarious
 - Good oral communication skills → confidence → leadership → professional success

Where does this take us?

- Deficit model → saviour mode, tough love
- Euphemisms, excuses and exceptions - Cultural stereotypes, pop psychology → low expectations
- Reinforce the dominant pedagogy, privilege oral participation

Looking at our practice ...

- Is oral contribution the only way to engage with the topic or material?
- What impact does this have on the students' needs and priorities? Do adjustments need to be made?
- Who has agency?
- What is lost/gained in the process? What is the trade off?
- What message are we sending our students and society?

It starts in the classroom

- Model active listening skills
- Create an environment where all reasonable views are welcome (not just those we agree with)
- Encourage and demand thoughtful, critical debate rather than opinionated or dogmatic beliefs
- Acknowledge and commend constructive contributions (especially those based on listening and learning from others)

Do you agree – why or why not?

As a teacher, I remember the students who speak up in class. It's easier to write references for them too as I can always always mention how they spoke up in class, took the initiative, worked in groups ... These are the skills employers want.

There is a quiet student in one my seminar groups. I know from reading her weekly blog posts that she gets it, but she does not participate during the seminar. She could elevate the discussion if she participated as she has some wonderful insights. I feel she is missing out on the opportunity to share her knowledge.

Humans are social animals. Teachers and peers will consciously or unconsciously expect participation. Being confident and speaking well is a way to assert your influence in class and persuade your peers.

I give my students the choice. If they want to hear a range of views, all of them need to speak up, otherwise the dominant speakers will take over the discussion. Inclusive ✓ student agency ✓ student voice ✓

The quieter ones are always difficult to place when it comes to assigning students to group projects. The home students, while sympathetic to the linguistic barriers EAL students face, feel that the EAL students will not pull their weight and their overall project grade will suffer.

