

Reda, Mary M. *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009

Reviewed by Johanna Schmertz

Mary Reda's *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students* first began as a presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (4C's) on the topic of silent students. The point of her paper—that teachers do not sufficiently question their own negative assumptions about silence in the classroom—was apparently lost on her audience. To Reda's dismay, they responded not to her claims but with stories about their own silent students, whom they seemed to perceive as resistant, non-participatory, disengaged, or simply not ready for the intellectual demands of college inquiry.

Reda's response, as she explains in Chapter One, was to let these quiet students speak for themselves and for each other, with the hope of using their narratives to “interrupt” the sort of teacher narratives she heard at 4Cs (and admits to occasionally being guilty of herself). Placing herself in the role of teacher-researcher, and her students in the role of insider-participants, she conducted a study of silences in the classroom. Her subjects were students who self-identified as quiet and were willing to explore moments of classroom speech and silence. Her data consisted of student journals, her own teaching journal, interviews with five “focal” students who she felt best represented the demographics of her class and the themes that emerged from it, and students' comments on those interview transcripts.

Chapter Two discusses the ways in which student silences are seen as problematic, not just in the sort of casual teacher talk she witnessed at 4Cs, but in the scholarship on composition as well. In Chapter Three, Reda charts her own movements between silence and speech while she was a student, revealing her own investments in the topic she is exploring. Chapters Four, Five and Six describe her research context and analysis of her findings, and Chapter Seven concludes with a discussion of a “small but

growing” body of scholarship in composition that presents an alternative construction of silence that is in line with her own belief that silence is not necessarily a sign of a student’s or a teacher’s failure, but in fact can be both productive and dialogic. (I count twenty articles in her bibliography with the word “Silence” in their title, and I wonder how the book would have gone if she had begun, rather than ended, with these scholars.)

Reda’s pedagogy is heavily influenced by expressivism. She began her study at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she was a graduate student, and followed its curriculum, which uses journaling, freewriting, student-teacher conferencing and workshopping as tools in a process-based pedagogy aimed at getting students to identify and articulate their identities as well as share them with others. Her research approach fits best in the camp of feminist revisions of dialogic education and critical pedagogy. (Writers like Gesa Kirsch, Mimi Orner and Elizabeth Ellsworth are often cited to support her argument.) Reda notes that silent students pose a particular problem for those teachers who see the classroom as dialogic. She agrees in principle with Bruffee, Dewey and Freire that students learn best when they construct knowledge together, and also with Schor, Freire and hooks that teachers should empower students by establishing the classroom as a site where differences can be aired, explored, and acknowledged. However, like some of the feminist critics of critical pedagogy whom she cites, she also recognizes that classrooms constructed as contact zones can in fact be unequal exchanges of power. Certain students (particularly women) may be at a disadvantage when teachers measure their learning by their degree of active participation. Dialogic education defines the good student as the one who contributes often to classroom discussion. By implication, Reda contends, dialogic education also defines silent students as non-participatory and, therefore, as failed learners.

One of Reda’s most important points is that students do not view classroom participation the way we do. They never characterize their own silences as deliberately oppositional, but

they do find participation risky and are in the dark about why their teachers might require it. Reda's "silent" students recognize that they learn from each other and from classroom discussions, but they report learning more from listening than from speaking, and they do not necessarily recognize that this is part of the reason why their teachers want them to speak.

Another point made by Reda is that students do not necessarily know that their teachers see classroom talk as fundamental to their learning processes, and often see teachers' participation requirements as coercive. When their teachers push them to critique their own ideas, students may believe their teachers are looking for a single right answer. Such pushing, part of the culture of the academy, may in some cases be counterproductive to the goal of empowering students. (On this count, Reda offers two stories of male professors who challenged the assertions of female students who confronted them, possibly in order to push their thinking further, but with the end result that the students—one being Reda herself—felt their identities had been violated). Teacher participation requirements put students at the risk of judgment from their community of peers as well; speaking in front of their peers potentially puts both their identities and intelligence into question. In response to perceived threats from fellow students or their teacher, Reda's "silent" students report that they choose their words carefully, and in some cases feel they must shut out the perceptions of others in order to perform in the ways their teachers seem to require.

Thus, Reda suggests that the active oral participation we as teachers encourage, and perceive as evidence of student engagement, may in many cases be merely disengaged performance. Students who speak without fear of judgment are often simply more self-confident than others, not more astute. We may have more to learn from those students we call "silent," because, as Reda puts it, "silence is the necessary medium through which one engages with and interacts critically with one's world" (161). Reda suggests that quiet students are often wrestling with the very issues we teach in writing classes, such as how to best

present themselves (148). They are making active, conscious choices when they decide to speak (or not). They are examining and evaluating their rhetorical choices at any given moment, rejecting certain options but choosing others, so that when they *do* speak, their speech will be more effective. Reda says she measured her own silences in graduate school, and those of her students when she first started teaching, “by the words that surrounded them” (62).

What *do* “silent” students want? According to Reda’s students, a sense of intimacy, safety and comfort, community. Despite the risks to their identities, quiet students are nevertheless seeking community, and need such a community in order to establish the kind of engaged learning critical educators seek for them. They also want to see their teachers as having identities outside the classroom and for their teachers to recognize that they have identities outside the classroom as well. While these mutual recognitions take time, they create spaces where students feel that socially constructed learning is a viable possibility. Reda’s students indicate that more respect for students’ right to remain silent is necessary before students and teachers can create the sort of community that makes connected learning possible.

Reda concludes her book with a few teaching recommendations. She suggests that teachers give space to a variety of class formats: individual work, small group work, and whole class discussion. She suggests teachers might teach listening, and might encourage students to link their comments to those of others. Teachers might find ways of conducting dialog through writing, such as having students write comments on each others’ drafts and then passing them along to other students for comment so that the writer has a history of dialog to respond to. Reda has learned from her students’ requests that she should build in freewriting time each day and invite (but not require) students to read from it. I would add two things to Reda’s list of teaching strategies: the double entry journal, which provides opportunities for students to reflect on and develop their ideas, and networked

communication, where quiet students are more likely to engage in dialog.

I am glad Reda has taken up the cause of quiet students—I was often a quiet student myself, as was she, as she described in her third chapter. It may be that we need a whole book in our defense. Unfortunately, Reda’s methodology is flawed in significant ways. The first problem is her limited and non-representative study sample. She studied a single freshman writing class at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where the students (86% white, average GPA of 3.33 and average SAT of 1127) often have siblings attending Ivy League schools. The particular writing class Reda studied lived in a set of dorms with the reputation for being more “academic.” Reda attempts to compensate for the monolithic composition of her students by choosing as her “focal students” an Indian and a Jewish immigrant, but one cannot say her focal students represent the demographics of U.S. colleges today. We are left to draw our own conclusions about whether students in more mixed, less culturally privileged college settings would explain their silences in the same ways.

In addition to problems with her sample, Reda seems to struggle with what sort of analysis she is doing. Calling her study “qualitative,” but never explaining exactly what she means by this term, she at first sets out to portray her students in five separate case studies. Deciding that her students’ remarks overlap too much to be separated out, she abandons her original case study approach in favor of displaying a “profusion of voices.” She also adds in the voices of non-focal students when they support the claims of her five focal students. The result is a book that never synthesizes all the voices it includes: quotes from students get repeated in multiple contexts and passages from scholars in the field are allowed to speak for themselves without any sort of rhetorical framing on Reda’s part. It may be that Reda does not want to subordinate the voices of her students to those of experts, or the voices of experts to her own. Possibly, Reda is attempting to performatively display for her readers the dialogue of voices she hears, and wishes her readers to hear. But what may have begun as

a principled feminist stance—an attempt to do research that is minimally invasive and refuses to speak for others—ends up appearing disorganized and unfocused.

One thing that stands out about *Between Silence and Speech* is the way Reda's students engaged with her project. One student in particular (his pseudonym in the book is Sanjay) appears to have taken very seriously his role as co-investigator in Reda's project, questioning his own silence and that of others with particular rigor. Another student decided to write a research paper on shyness in her class, perhaps seeing herself as doing a project parallel to Reda's own. Imagining possible objections to her study, Reda discounts the possibility of the "Hawthorne" effect, according to which research subjects who know they are being studied perform behaviors they believe the researcher is looking for. I think it is odd that Reda asserts the objectivity of her findings in this way, given the feminist ethnographic approach she takes, although I agree that her students do not seem to have become more or less silent simply because they knew she was studying classroom silences. What I wish Reda had noticed is the way her research project *did* change her students: they (or at least some of them) became more reflective about the classroom and the roles they are playing in it as a result of her study. This extra element of reflection demonstrates what for me is one of the merits of practitioner inquiry and teacher research: modeling for students the sort of thinking behaviors the university attempts to teach.