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Between Speaking and Silence: a Study of Quiet Students, by Mary M. Reda, offers advice to instructors about the quiet student in the classroom. Reda offers definitions of such students, and explores the reasons why students are quiet and the ways that instructors might work with these silences.

For any teacher who has stood in front of a classroom, asked a question, and waited through the silence for an answer, or pondered at the end of the semester on how to give a participation grade to a student who never said a word, Mary M. Reda's *From Speaking to Silence: A Study of Quiet Students* offers invaluable insights and hopeful advice. Reda explores the issue of quiet students: defined here as those who do not actively participate in class discussions, those who seem uncomfortable or even defiant when called on, or those who speak as little as possible. Her book, largely based on research that she gathered from her students, includes substantial reflections from them on their own experiences as quiet or not-so-quiet students in a variety of classroom situations. Reda also explores the derivations of silence in particular classroom situations, using both her and her student's experiences.

Who is the quiet student? Reda explores this notion through several vehicles, including studies of gender, class, and response. According to current studies, girls and women are typically quieter in the classroom. However, Reda troubles those studies by pointing to the fact that they assume from the outset that “not being able to speak leads to not knowing,” a concept that she challenges (40). While gender can be one factor, Reda also explores the idea that class may play a part in quietness. Studies have shown that students from working-class backgrounds, who largely attend public universities, may view themselves as having little to say and may consider themselves outside of the intellectual life and conversation of the university. They may expect to come to class and listen, respectfully, to the authority in the room, but they typically do not view themselves as active participants in the classroom process. They may also be used to classroom situations where the large number of students in the room may discourage discussion. Despite the fact that instructors may indeed value student response in some university classrooms (particularly in composition), students who have constructed themselves as outsiders to the institution or as one of a large, anonymous group may have difficulty participating in conversations that they do not feel qualified or welcome to enter.

The quiet student can be particularly vexing for compositionists, who often rely on classroom participation as a key part of their pedagogy. Reda
is quick to point out that one of the major difficulties with quiet students is that they violate a major rule for “good” composition teaching—that the students lead the discussion and that the teacher says as little as possible and attempts not to silence students by her actions. We fear that the silent student represents an older, archetypal model of the great teacher, filling a silent and complacent student with expert knowledge. We are also gratified to see students working in groups, discussing their work with one another, and providing critical feedback in classroom discussions. Because of our training, however, students who do not participate in discussions (large or small group) lead us to feel that our methods are not working. We worry that the quiet student is one who does not understand. Aside from troubling the instructor, however, designing a classroom based on student participation and dialogic investigation, so deeply embedded in our lore through key practitioners such as Dewey, Freire and Shor, does not accommodate (and may even alienate) students who are quiet in productive ways.

Reda makes an essential point about all quiet students when she notes that instructors must learn that students who are not talking are not necessarily failing to understand, not doing anything constructive, or, at the worst, being intentionally belligerent. Rather, silence is, for many students, often a productive mode of learning. Students who listen more often than they speak felt that they were paying more attention and making more critical observations than those who were talking. As Reda notes, “Silence, then, can be a process of active engagement with the ideas of others” (159). Quiet students may indeed be having an internal conversation with themselves that the instructor cannot access. Elizabeth Samet notes that the seasoned instructor is one who looks “to distinguish the I’m-thinking silence from the I-have-no-idea-what-she’s-talking-about variety” (59). Reda advocates that we should find ways to respect, rather than disturb, the “I’m-thinking” silences. Calling on quiet students, for example, may cause them extreme discomfort. Conversely, ignoring them can leave them feeling unnoticed and does not promote the development of teacher-student relationships.

Reda notes that instructors must also be aware of the reasons for student silence that our assignments may unwittingly create in the writing classroom. In particular, she points to the obvious but overlooked fact that student texts tend to make up the key readings for the classroom. Our attempts at having students get to know one another and creating comfortable spaces for them can also make students feel especially vulnerable. Under such circumstances, they may become less likely to want to speak, especially before they have had a chance to establish trusting relationships with other students in the room, or learn which students they want to avoid. They may create works that are below their potential because they are working so hard to impress
their peers, or they may even fail to turn work in if they feel threatened. As Reda astutely observes, not providing writing for class discussion can function as another form of quietness.

Reda offers a number of reasons quiet students behave as they do: students may be quiet because they are learning the culture of college and that particular classroom. They may have previously been silenced in class by a teacher or a peer. Students who had this experience reported being more likely to remain quiet in what they considered to be other high-risk situations. Students may also have encountered “discussion-based” classrooms where the dialogue consisted of the instructor asking questions and the students providing the “correct” answers. Students learn early on that the dialogue is really more of a question-and-answer situation. Finally, students may simply be reluctant to share their views and ideas with peers and an instructor with whom they are not familiar and have not yet established any level of trust. Overall, students offered Reda a variety of reasons for silence, and ultimately did not offer consistent, patterned reasons for their quietness.

Given the diversity of responses she encountered, Reda advocates gaining a greater understanding of our individual students and why they might or might not be speaking. In part, she stresses the need for student-teacher conferences, starting early in the semester. While many of us use these as a way to help students with their writing in a more direct way, the student conference can also draw the quiet student out. It can cause the student discomfort, certainly (many students don’t know what to expect from such conferences before they come), but it can also help ascertain reasons why a student is speaking or remaining quiet in the classroom. It can tease out the difference between a quietly reflective student and one who does not understand. It can also help to develop trust between the student and instructor, potentially creating a situation where the student may feel more comfortable to speak out in the larger classroom.

As well, Reda advocates using silences in the classroom. She cites several instances that her students had recalled when they had been asked simply to sit quietly and think about the material that they had learned. In a more meditative setting, quiet spaces were used for reflection, for internalization of concepts learned, and for furthering later discussions. Particularly for students who were not typically active classroom participants, this seemed to be a valuable tool in their learning. Reda also notes that we must more carefully define what we mean by participation when we make that a required part of the course and grade on it.

While Reda’s exploration of the reasons for students’ quietness offers insights, I did find myself wishing for more solid advice for classroom instructors. Because of the variety of reasons that students offered for their quietness, it is difficult to draw any single lesson from Reda’s findings that could be unilaterally incorporated in the classroom. I wondered what some
of her other suggestions might actually look like in concrete form. I found myself wishing, for example, for a sample of a revised participation policy that took student quietness into account, or somehow graded student participation in ways other than ones that were speech-based.

Ultimately, Reda’s book offers important alternative ways of thinking about the use of dialogue and discussion in our classrooms and of the role of quietness and quiet students. While she does not (and cannot) solve all of the challenges of having quiet students in the classroom, she throws down the gauntlet to instructors to analyze their own discourse, and to re-think and re-vision their classroom in more inclusive, more productive ways.

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Work Cited


*Rev. by Cheri Lemieux Spiegel, Northern Virginia Community College*

As the fall semester comes to a close, I’m struck by unique challenges and victories afforded me as a result of technology. This semester, more than those prior it, I have puzzled at how to best serve my students, who have largely developed their communication skills in a discourse community heavily influenced by text messages, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, and Facebook. On the one hand, I fight my gut impulse to “fix” the students’ tendencies to compose in “text speak” and cringe at the usage of “u” to symbolize “you.” At the same time, I find myself fascinated with the potential opportunities new technologies such as podcasting, digital imaging software, and blogs might bring to my classroom. I wonder at how to make the technology work for me and my students rather than against us. I am curious whether new composing tools and delivery methods, such as Twitter and YouTube, will allow students to convey or construct meaning in as rich or perhaps richer means than what has been possible to me through the traditional print-based essay.

These concerns are not new to me nor our discipline. With each new development in technology, those in Rhetoric and Composition are tasked with adapting to strengthen pedagogy and better use the resources newly available. In *The Two Virtuals*, Alexander Reid responds to this perennial need to adapt to the ever growing expanse of technology with an approach