

A Critical Exploration of the Relation between Silence, Education and Assessment

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Abstract

Western societies have become increasingly knowledge and information based economies, and educational reforms have put measurable knowledge and assessment at the top of the agenda in order to create effective schools. In this paper, we critically explore the relation between silence, education and assessment, drawing mainly on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and to some extent the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow. Our overall aim is to open up for discussion the significance of silence in education, with a focus on the interplay between silence and assessment.

Some students are experienced by others or by themselves as silent. Perhaps, they are neither given, nor do they take, the space that is required for participation in a conversation. They remain silent even though the ongoing discussion wakens their reflections and thoughts, or even if they know the answer to questions asked. Merleau-Ponty emphasises, that there is something that exists beyond what is said, something which cannot be communicated verbally, which he calls a silent and implicit language. Since exams are mainly based on words, the silent dimensions of students' knowledge and achievement may be neglected. Exams, written or verbally, thus run the risk of being limitations for fair assessment. To stop and think about silence can draw attention to the importance of listening to the silent and implicit language of students in different teaching situations, especially when it comes to assessment.

Keywords: silence, education, assessment, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Otto Friedrich Bollnow

Introduction

Western societies have become increasingly knowledge and information based economies, and education is emphasised as a way to enable countries to compete on the global market (Ball, 2003, 2008; Gray, 2012; OECD & Benett, 2006; Tatto, 2006). Accordingly, more people with higher levels of education are required, and the starting point for this agenda is effective schools.

A knowledge effective school prioritises measurable accomplishment and international competitiveness (Castell, 2000; Aspelin & Persson, 2011), and the needs of the economy have, in turn, become the argument for educational measures (Biesta, 2006). Consequently, international and national educational policies and large-scale reforms have put measurable content knowledge, standardisation, documentation, and assessment at the top of the agenda (Hargreaves, 2009; Moss 2007). Research, policy changes, pedagogical debates, as well as, pedagogical practices, therefore tend to focus on simple descriptions based on standardised tests and how to achieve better results, instead of appreciating and trying to understand the complexity of teaching and learning (Rodgers & Raider Roth, 2006). In addition, humans' ability to orally, and in writing express themselves explicitly has become of great importance. However, according to Merleau-Ponty (1995) there is something that exists beyond what is said, something that cannot be communicated verbally, which he calls a silent and implicit language. This reveals a tension between, on the one hand, uttered and explicit expressions, and on the other hand, silent and implicit expressions, of importance to discuss in connection with contemporary educational agenda.

Within the framework of this paper, we critically explore the relation between silence, education, and assessment, drawing mainly on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and to some extent the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow. Our overall aim is therefore to open up for discussion the significance of silence in education, with a focus on the interplay between silence and assessment.

Silence and education

According to Merleau-Ponty (1995), silence is an inevitable dimension of human beings' existence, an essential aspect of communication, and therefore: '... we must uncover the threads of silence that speech is mixed together with' (p. 46). In schools, some students may be experienced by others, or by themselves, as silent. Perhaps they neither are given nor do they take the silent space that is required for participation in a conversation or in an exam. A student might remain silent even though the ongoing discussion awakens thoughts, reflections and opinions, and might also continue to be silent even though he or she knows the answer to the question which the teacher has just asked. According to Bateson (1987), a quiet person, for example a student remaining silent, conveys a 'non-message', and this non-message is also a message. The question is though how these non-messages could be understood.

Every human being has, according to Polanyi (1969), silent and unexpressed dimensions within themselves. These silent dimensions acknowledge situations where we recognise that we know more than we can explain or express, which Polanyi terms as *tacit knowledge*. He claims that knowledge never could be totally expressed and explicit. Beyond our ordinary spoken or written words there is, according to Polanyi, a rich domain of the unspeakable that constantly beckons us. Expressed in other words, knowledge is not always accessible for our linguistic competence, which van Manen (1990) calls *epistemological silence*. A person is confronted with this kind of epistemological silence when he or she faces the unspeakable, which cannot be expressed in words. However, what seems to be unspeakable within the framework of one discourse might within another discourse, easily be expressed. One example is (social) sciences which may have difficulty in giving a satisfactory explanation of the experiences of love, while this can be illustrated very well through poetry, music, paintings or other art forms (van Manen, 1990).

Also Merleau-Ponty (1995) emphasises that our silent and implicit language can appear through visual presentations, such as different kinds of art forms. Furthermore, he stresses how thought, language, and relations are intertwined, and that human beings speak with both body and language: 'Each drawing each other with invisible threads... making the other speak, think, and become what he is but never would have been by himself' (p. 19). People affect and change each other through communication in intertwined relationships, and language cannot therefore be viewed as a representation, a second layer that translates an original layer. Rather, language can be described as a metamorphosis of the mute world, expressing more than it says (Carbone, 2000). According to Merleau-Ponty (1995, 1996), thought and language, but also the body, are intertwined, and according to the citation above, strongly connected to inter-subjectivity, in terms of relations and context as an expressive and relational field. In this relational field, different kinds of dialogue are of significance, and according to Buber (1993) genuine dialogue can be both spoken and mute, the latter referred to as *speaking silence*. Heidegger (1971) emphasises that a person may speak endlessly but say nothing, and that another person can say a great deal without speaking at all, remaining silent. In this way, silence tells us something – silence becomes a language when the spoken word is insufficient, when silence is preferred or enforced (Alerby, 2012a).

Silence and assessment

In society of today, it has become quite common, especially in English and French speaking countries that curricula are narrowed and test-focused, which in turn has had a negative effect on the development of student's knowledge (Harlen, 2007). In addition, even countries like Sweden, which has until recently had a strong orientation towards education as a social and democratic movement, have been affected by this rationalistic agenda. When the global educational discourse, which emphasises economic investment and profit, confronts the Swedish educational discourse, ambivalences and tensions are emerging (Tallberg Broman & Persson, 2010). In Sweden, the views on assessment have changed from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for*

learning, a shift from exclusively using summative assessment, to emphasising formative assessment as a way to enhance students' learning (Giota, 2006; Lindström & Lindberg, 2005). As well, there has been a shift of what to assess, where the student's understandings and competences such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and communication are emphasised more than before (Giota, 2006). Still, it seems like summative assessment is strongly emphasised in the global agenda of standardisation.

Knowledge that provides success in international tests is prioritised at the expense of values education and student-centred learning (Aspelin & Persson, 2011; Kroksmark, 2013). In addition, research shows that standardisation and high-stake testing affects students in terms of disengagement with schooling and escalating dropout rates (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Therefore, it is relevant to illuminate the relation between silence and assessment, i.e. the language of assessment in terms of what can possibly be expressed through the format of the assessment.

During, for example, an oral exam the teacher has prepared a number of questions, and the students are supposed to respond verbally with the 'right' answers. Probably most of the students in the class are committed to the task and discuss and respond to the exam questions. But what happens if a student sits quietly behind his or hers desk without saying a word? It is likely that many of these, so called silent students, have knowledge, opinions and experiences to add to the discussion and answers to give to the questions, but choose for some reason not to express these, and therefore remain silent in the eyes (or ears) of the other students and the teacher (Alerby, 2012a, b).

A similar situation can occur during a written exam. Some students might answer only a few of the questions in the test, and left other questions unanswered, while some students might hand in the whole test unanswered. A student doing a written exam can choose not to explicitly answer the questions, to be silent, but in some situations silence is imposed, as the student cannot find words to respond in writing – a kind of *written silence*.

Accordingly, we can consider whether unanswered questions in a written exam, or an absence of explicit response to oral questions, is an active and conscious choice, lack of knowledge, or a lack of the means to express the knowledge in written or oral form. However, these students convey, according to Bateson (1987), a non-message, or rather a *silent message*. The question is thus whether a silent message can be judged and rated.

If a student is quiet during an exam, be it a written or an oral exam, the student, including the exam itself, can be viewed as silent, and it is likely that the so called silent student will be viewed as being without knowledge, and will fail the exam. However, it might be that the student actually has the knowledge and skills that are in demand, but has not the ability or desire to express this in writing or orally.

Bollnow (1982) claims that a person can remain silent for many reasons; questions in a written exam can be left blank, or in an oral exam left unanswered, through lack of knowledge, but also through carelessness, haste, boredom, annoyance, fatigue or lack of ability to explicitly express the knowledge. As well, a person can be silent for fear of exposing him- or herself by speaking openly, by the other students' talkativeness, or by fear of giving an answer to an exam question at which the other students might laugh.

Not answering an exam question can also be due to social expectations, depending on the nature of the situation. A number of transient influences can also affect the answer, for example the students' feelings or mood at the time, news events (e.g. the outcome of soccer games), seasonal variations (e.g. the weather) or the specific succession of questions (Alerby & Kostenius, 2011). Nevertheless, the exact reason why a student remains silent is often hard to reveal, and instead of seeking for a cause of the potential silence of students, we want to shed light on the significance of silence in connection to assessment.

According to the above presented, it is likely that student's silence during an exam may also be due to the language of assessment, which often do not invite to diverse expressions. Why a student does not answer a written or oral exam is probable a combination of different reasons, but these non-messages, to use Bateson's terminology, can, as we argued above, be seen as silent messages. In addition, a rationalistic and standardised

education valuing mainly summative assessments runs the risk of producing a culture where only predetermined outcomes, and correct answers without further reflection or exploration of the question, counts, which in turn may as well result in silenced students.

Silence and listening

An alternative culture as the above described, is a culture where it is allowed and accepted to reflect and experiment with answers. To be able to answer something which perhaps was not really asked for in the question, may lead the thoughts to new dimensions not originally planned. It is thus a question of striving for openness and sensitivity towards others and towards that which is said, in words or in silence, which in turn demands true listening (Alerby, 2012a, b). Such an education that appreciates otherness may, therefore, be built upon openness towards what is not yet known and what is about to come into being. Accordingly, as Westman and Alerby (2012, p. 370) stress: 'Complexity, discontinuity and irregularity are, therefore, of great value in education, and are at least as important as simplicity, continuity and regularity'.

Merleau-Ponty points at the risk of imposing our own experiences and thoughts on other humans. Consequently, in Merleau-Ponty's account, recognising the otherness in the sameness of the other, the divergence (*écart*), opens the possibility for an encounter that: '... gives me access to thoughts that I did not know myself capable of, that I *was* not capable of' (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968, p.13, italics in original). In other words, the intertwining of one's self and the other in all our differences makes us discover not only new dimensions of the knowledge we negotiate, but also new aspects of ourselves and each other.

Given this, education built upon an ethos valuing different perspectives and otherness, demands listening. To really listen to another person, the listening person him- or herself has to be quiet and in that way, silence is essential when listening. When the conversation then moves forward, it is a giving and receiving of silence versus speech. In conversations with others there must be silent pauses allowed and pursued, in order for the other person to be able to enter into the conversation, or to respond to an oral exam question. If this time is not offered, or if the person concerned are not willing or not able to take the space of silence and fill it with own words, no conversation will occur. Silence also gives the listener the opportunity to consider and respond to what has just been said. If a person is actively listening to the speaker, it becomes easier for the other person to express their own thoughts, opinions and experiences, and a genuine dialogue can follow (Alerby, 2012a, b).

When it comes to the dialogue existing in educational settings the pace of the communication is of significance. One important dimension of the dialogue pace is how much time the teacher allows students to respond to issues and/or questions before the teacher responds him/herself. The time between the question and the students' response is called *wait-time* by Rowe (1974, 1986). The teacher who asks questions might only give a short time for silence before filling the silence with instructions, commands and more questions. In the wait-times there is always a presence of silence, and wait-time can be seen as a conscious strategy to use silence in teaching situations. The use of silence can also be seen in terms of a teaching style which may encourage students to be in silence and reflect before they continue in the action. A dimension to take into consideration is how teachers use wait-time in connection to how questions of an oral exam are asked, but also how quickly the students answer the questions asked.

A further aspect of this is that stillness and silence in many cases are more tactful ways to get others to tell their story and whatever the person in question wants to pass on, beyond the replies to explicit questions (van Manen, 1990). It is in these silent interspaces that deep thought and reflection can arise. Let us here consider the situation in schools today, with a special focus on the exam situations. Are students given the opportunity for reflection by being allowed to be in the silent interspaces that can occur while two or more people are conversing? Or are these interspaces quickly filled with more words during an oral exam? It is where a conversation gradually fades away, when more and more interspaces occur, and it finally falls back into silence that the conversation, according to Bollnow, has been completed. A sign of a good conversation is that it finally returns to silence: '... and when the conversation finally does sink into silence, it is no empty silence, but fulfilled silence' (Bollnow, 1982, p. 46).

Accordingly, to open up for knowledge beyond predetermined outcomes, as well as dialogue and critical thinking, silence and diverse forms of expressions need to be allowed.

Some concluding remarks

van Manen (1990) argues that nothing is as silent as the totally self-evident, that which we take for granted. To elaborate on this reasoning is thus a matter of questioning that which is taken for granted. This approach coincides with how Merleau-Ponty demands us to interrogate our presumptions in a critical self-reflection that he terms hyper-reflection (Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968). In this case, to examine, test and assess students is a common and often unquestioned activity in education. Within this paper we are not questioning that students are assessed and graded in school. Rather we want to shed light on that which appears to happen when it comes to the relation between silence, education and assessment.

As we stressed in the beginning of this paper, humans' ability to orally and in writing express themselves explicitly has become of great importance in society of today. These skills are of significance in school as well, and students at all ages are expected to handle this. The ability to orally and in writing express oneself is also essential in most exams, and as a fundamental of all forms of assessment and rating. In connection to this, it is of importance that we reflect on the prevailing language and modes of expression that are allowed and used in schools. As mentioned above, Merleau-Ponty (1995) claims that not everything can be communicated verbally. A silent and implicit language can be made visible through different bodily or visual expressions, for example through gestures, pauses, art, paintings, music, dance, and drama.

Since curricula govern activities in educational settings, and the trend is towards increasing assessment, there is a risk that students' own thoughts, reflections and opinions are underestimated or ignored in favour of lecturing and assessing predetermined outcomes. We therefore claim that since exams are mainly based on words, and often performed outside a relational field, the silent dimensions of students' knowledge and achievement may be neglected. Exams, written or orally, thus run the risk of limiting fair assessment. To stop and think about silence can draw attention to the importance of listening to the silent and implicit language of students in different teaching situations, especially when it comes to assessment. In addition, a reconsideration of the relation between silence, education and assessment may enhance the design of exams, opening the way for diverse perspectives and reflections.

To give time and space to reflect on silent processes in education is important, not only to give the student time and space to reflect, but also for the teacher to observe and learn from what happens in the silence (Alerby & Elidottir, 2003). This is especially true when it comes to tests and examinations. A question to explore is therefore how students are rated and judged in exams – written as well as oral exams. If students are graded in accordance with their oral performance or explicit written words, the silent students will, as we emphasised earlier, probably fail. But if this is the case, what has actually been assessed?

Within the framework of this paper, our intention has been to illuminate and discuss the relation between silence, education and assessment, rather than to ascertain the cause of students' potential silence. The issue of assessment in relation to silence is in fact about what is actually counted as knowledge, and if students' expressions – silent or loud – count within education in general, and in assessment in specific. This in turn affects *how* we assess, and *what* is measured on tests and exams. In an era of global trends of standardised assessment we find it especially important to reflect upon the nuances of student knowledge that is not visible in exams. We therefore argue for an attempt to bring out students' silent and implicit language by appreciating otherness, what is not yet known, and letting students use different kinds of expressions – all to promote learning, and as a consequence create as fair assessment as possible for all students, talkative as well as silent.

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