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# Don't Talk -Listen: The Power of Silence in a Tutoring Session

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Don't Talk - Listen: The Power of Silence in a Tutoring Session

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Abstract: Why is silence so scary? This paper explores the reasons behind why silence is so hard for us as tutors to utilize in our tutoring sessions, as well as the benefits of using silence and wait time. These benefits include an effective learning environment, a stronger understanding of the student and their assignment, and a respect for the student's ideas and authorship of their paper.

Silence. He fills the room as I anxiously wait for the student to respond to my question. Silence and I have never been the best of friends, but as I continue my work as a writing center tutor, I am slowly learning to get along with him. The student shifts uncomfortably as silence presses against her, pestering her to say something, to dispel him from the room. I sit, waiting, letting silence envelop me. Eventually the student scares silence away by venturing forth a response. I smile, let out a small slight sigh of relief, and we move forward with the session.

I have never been naturally comfortable with silence. He and I have an uneasy relationship at times - he intrudes on my tutoring sessions, and I push him away as quickly as I can. And I know I am not the only one who feels this way. But why is it so hard for us to find comfort in silence? Paul W. Blythe, a Canadian psychologist, says that when a group experiences “uncomfortable silence, it can engender a good deal of [negative emotions, such as] ire, indignation, and disappointment” (69). In the context of my tutoring sessions, I fear that I may be causing these negative emotions in the students I work with. Additionally, in her article about silence in conversation, Deborah Tannen expresses that a negative characteristic of silence is that it can show a failure of language (94). I have often felt pressure from students to have all the answers - to be an expert of the English language. Combining that pressure with the above attribute of silence, it is easy to conclude that we should not include silence in our tutoring sessions because it implies that we have failed as a tutor. Sound becomes a blanket we wrap ourselves in - it gives us comfort and allows us to hide our own insecurities. When I tutor, I often find myself giving in to my self-doubt by filling silence before the student has a chance to respond. I easily fall into one of two traps: I either rephrase my question, convinced that the reason the student didn't answer immediately was because I had phrased the question poorly; or I jump in with my own answer, telling myself that the student is obviously uncomfortable with

silence so I should fill it to make their time at the writing center more enjoyable. However, even though these responses are natural, they are not effective teaching strategies. In order for students to really learn, there must be silence.

Silence is important in an educational setting for the following reasons. First, it helps build a good foundation for conversation. As Karen Morris says, “silence is an ally to communication” (14). Conversation involves at least two people communicating their thoughts and ideas; in order for that to be accomplished, one must be silent to give the other a chance to speak. Additionally, silence gives students time to formulate their response. In research done in elementary school classrooms, Barbara Maroni found that “wait time [after a question] fosters the pupils’ involvement and the quality of their answers” (2081). A positive characteristic of silence as discussed by Tannen is that it allows for personal exploration (94). By giving students time to think about and process questions, we enable them to formulate better responses, which will help the session as a whole progress. Finally, silence can create long wait times, which require students to respond, thereby compelling them to “play a more active role in the tutorial” (Morris 14). When students are actively involved in the learning process, especially in a writing center visit, the time will run smoothly and both the student and the teacher will leave feeling accomplished.

When we as tutors put away our own insecurities and become comfortable with silence, we will foster a better learning environment for the students we work with. This positive setting comes with many benefits. As we create this better learning environment with silence, we will be able to listen and understand the students we work with better. This will not only promote a better tutoring session, but it will also help us to respect the student’s ideas and authorship of their paper.

In order to have an effective tutoring session, the tutor and the student must understand each other. The more we as tutors understand the student, the more focused and direct the session can be. And in order to get to know the student, we must have conversations with them. Cicero, a Roman statesman born in 106 B.C., said that “silence is one of the great arts of conversation.” If we, while trying to get to know a student, don’t pause and give them time to respond, then we won’t ever learn anything about them, their assignment, or their writing!

A crucial part of understanding the student we are working with in the writing center is being aware of what they want from the session - what they are concerned about and what questions they have. One tutor I observed earlier in the semester understood this principle well. After taking a few minutes to get to know the student, he said, “Well, we have 20-25 minutes to talk about your paper. The time is yours; how do you want to use it?” At first, the student didn’t know how to respond, but as the tutor patiently waited, she eventually expressed a few ideas. By asking this question, the student was able to voice her concerns, and the tutor was able to understand the student and her writing better and thereby tailor the session to meet her needs.

Perhaps the most important benefit of inviting silence into sessions at the writing center is the fact that the ideas in the student’s paper are completely their own. When we ask questions we must be prepared to wait, invite silence into our session, and give the student time to formulate a response. Authors Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli in *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* state that a “deliberate use of wait time communicates to writers that they are expected to think and arrive at answers on their own” (24). One brainstorming session I had a few weeks ago demonstrated this principle. The student walked into my room with slumped shoulders and eyes turned towards the ground. I could tell he was naturally shy and extremely nervous about being at the tutoring center, so I started with some light conversation. Questions

about what brought him to the writing center revealed he had only a vague understanding of the assignment description. The prompt was broad, so I asked him questions to try and help him narrow down his topic. Each of my questions resulted in what felt like minutes of quiet, the student staring at the ground. I forced myself to let silence be present, to give the student time to respond. And each time, he eventually gave a response. If I had jumped in to fill the silence and offered suggestions right away, we might have been able to get more done during the session, but the draft would be full of more of my ideas than his. There was a lot of uncomfortable wait time, but at the end of the session we had found a topic he was excited about and developed a good outline. And the best part - the ideas were completely his own.

Silence and I are still not the best of friends. He still intrudes where he is not welcome and exposes my insecurities. However, I have been able to improve my relationship with him as I have realized the positive consequences he brings to my tutoring sessions. With silence, I am able to create a positive learning environment for the students I tutor. With silence, I am prepared to understand the students I work with better. And with silence, I can enable students to become better writers by respecting their authorship. In short, it is with silence that I am the best tutor I can be. So I sit patiently, let him press against me and the student I am working with, let him demand a response. It is well worth the uncomfortable wait, every time.

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