

Speaking Up: A Phenomenological Study of Student Perceptions of Being Silenced in their Higher Education Classrooms

Antonio Delgado
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This phenomenological study explored students' experiences of being silenced in their higher education classroom. Themes emerging from this study include the influence of past experiences, devaluation of students' previous knowledge and learning, use of communication patterns to silence students, and internalization of conflict and oppression resulting from being silenced.

"Sometimes a simple, almost insignificant gesture on the part of a teacher can have a profound formative effect on the life of a student" (Freire, 1998, p. 46). Regardless of the professor's intentions or self-awareness, his/ her actions can damage and marginalize a student from the learning process. This happened to me. In a graduate course, a classmate made an offhanded remark about gay men I considered inappropriate. I interrupted the class and stated my concern that the remark was based on stereotypes and false assumptions. When my professor insufficiently addressed my concerns, I became angry with her resistance to using the situation as a learning opportunity and her confrontational stance towards me. I felt silenced similar to the way other people may be silenced, such as being ignored when hands are raised and opinions are ignored or not taken seriously (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). The professor never approached me to talk about what occurred. This negatively impacted my future relationship with her.

There was a disconnect between what my professor said she valued and what her practice demonstrated, which is common of educators professing to value social justice and fairness (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). I was disappointed by the shortcoming and this apparent dichotomy between the professor's espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Learning is facilitated when students view teachers as having both credibility and authenticity (Brookfield, 2006), which involves consistency between what they say and what they do. When learning is sacrificed, a lose-lose situation is created for both the teacher and the student, as was the outcome in my situation.

Subsequently, as a requirement for a qualitative research course, I decided to find other students who may have had similar experiences. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experience of being silenced in the classroom from the point of view of those who have felt this suppression. This study was designed to address the following question: How do students perceive their experience of being silenced in their higher education classroom?

Method and Design

This phenomenological study explored how students describe and make meaning of a phenomenon experienced by them directly (Patton, 2002), specifically being silenced in their higher education classroom. An email explaining the intent of my study was sent via a listserv to graduate students enrolled in the College of Education at a large, urban public research university in southeast Florida. Three students self-disclosed being silenced and agreed to participate in the study using a pseudonym to provide confidentiality. The three female students in their 30's were Denise (African American), Turquoise (Cuban American), and Maya (Venezuelan).

Using a semi-structured interview protocol (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), participants were interviewed for approximately one hour each. Additional data were collected in a researcher journal containing reflections throughout the study. Content analysis was conducted to analyze “the core content of interviews and observations to determine what’s significant” (Patton, 2002, p. 463). Integrity measures to promote quality were used in this study included member checks, peer review, and an audit trail. Member checks is a process of sharing data and preliminary interpretations with the participants from which the data was obtained (Merriam, 2002) to verify accuracy and that the analysis strikes a cord with participants. Colleagues from my qualitative class provided peer review on the research method and interview guide and an audit trail in the form of a researcher journal was kept containing detailed information about the methods, procedures, and decisions made during the course of the study (Merriam, 2002).

Research Findings

This section presents themes and concepts emerging from the analysis of the interviews conducted. The themes include the following: (a) silencing is not forgotten; (b) influence of past experiences; (c) devaluation of students’ previous knowledge and learning; (d) use of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication to silence students; and (d) internalization of conflict and oppression.

Silencing is Not Forgotten

The three participants in this study shared with me their own stories on how they felt silenced by a professor in their higher education classroom. Denise, Turquoise, and Maya shared how these experiences influenced their development as teachers. Denise, Turquoise, and Maya feel the need to avoid the same mistakes they perceived their former teachers made.

Denise. After dropping out of college and working in corporate America, Denise returned as a nontraditional student to pursue her undergraduate study at a historically Black college in Georgia. There she experienced a conflict with a professor she perceived was condescending and racially discriminatory. For example, Denise shared how the professor stated the course requirements were too high for “you people.” The professor was a White female in a predominantly African American classroom. Also, the professor displayed inappropriate behaviors, such as placing her hand in front of Denise’s face as a means to silence her. When Denise attempted to do something about her professor’s conduct, her advisor and the Dean protected the professor and once again she felt silenced.

Turquoise. Turquoise’s experience was a bit different and unexpected for me. She shared how she felt silenced and marginalized in her classroom as a result of her weight. Turquoise was enrolled in an undergraduate geology course. She shared how the professor would not acknowledge her in class no matter how many times she raised her hand. Turquoise noticed how the same professor did not ignore the thinner girls whom she perceived to be attractive. The experiences in that classroom built on her negative self-perceptions about her weight.

Maya. Maya shared her story about an English course where she felt targeted by her teacher due to ethnic and epistemological differences. Maya felt her professor was overly critical and held her to different standards than the rest of her classmates. She did not feel there was room for her to express herself and was frequently ignored or dismissed.

Influence of Past Experiences

All three participants shared how past experiences were influential in the way they perceived and dealt with being silenced in their classroom. For example, past experiences related to family upbringing were discussed in my conversations with each of the participants. However, the way their family upbringing influenced them was slightly different.

Both Maya and Denise shared how their parents instilled in them the idea that they needed to stand up for themselves, even in the classroom. Maya shared how her mother was influential in how she dealt with the conflict with her teacher:

My mom was always a very feisty person, and the kind of person who said you better stand up for whatever it is you believe, and you better stand up if somebody's pushing you around. And so she's the one that incited me to go and do something about it, because at first I was just going to let it be, and I was going to wallow...in my sadness.

In a similar way, Denise shared about her parents:

My father was the equal opportunity officer at the Pentagon...So I grew up watching people fight injustice, and like I said, he would always tell us what you don't fight for, your children will have to. So he always instilled this in his children; you have to stand up for what's right. Nobody else is responsible for that, but you.

With both Maya and Denise, the way they handled their respective situations in the classroom correspond to what their parents taught them. Both confronted their teachers and sought ways to manage the conflict. However, Turquoise was taught to perceive teachers as authority figures she should respect and follow. "In my culture I was brought up that the teacher's always right." Turquoise did not confront her teacher because of the important social status ascribed to teachers in her culture.

Denise and Maya both shared stories about how their study and travel shaped influenced them. Maya attended high school outside of the United States and shared how her teachers were all "hippies" and they always conveyed the message "you better fight for your rights." Denise had also traveled a bit prior to her undergraduate studies and felt that her student peers who had lived in small or rural settings were used to living in ways that maintained a divided society along racial lines. Denise also shared: "I think because of my experiences, I was more sensitive, to silencing than some of them may have been....So their experiences are a little bit different. They're used to a certain type of treatment from authority figures." According to the stories participants shared, a wider scope of experiences and perspectives helped them deal with another person who was marginalizing and silencing them.

One related story Turquoise shared with me occurred when she was in the third grade. One time, Turquoise needed to go to the restroom and asked her teacher for permission and the teacher replied she may if Turquoise promised to go on a diet. Early childhood memories such as this one created what Turquoise coined "a wound that I had in there." So when her geology professor only entertained the girls in class Turquoise perceived as pretty, she was easily hurt because of the negative self-image she had developed over the years.

Devaluation of Students' Previous Knowledge and Learning

Participants in this study felt silenced when teachers undervalued their knowledge and prior learning. "He doesn't want to hear what I have to say," Turquoise stated. She developed this perception as the teacher repeatedly failed to acknowledge her in the classroom every time she raised her hand to answer a question or provide her input. When teachers decide which students to acknowledge, they are deciding whose voices will be heard.

Teachers silence and marginalize their students when they express intellectual superiority over their students and do not value the knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom. Denise shared how she struggled with having an academic dialogue with her professor: "And whenever I would try to have these discussions with her in class, she would shut me down, she would put her hand up, or she would turn her back to me, or she would just ignore my hand altogether." Since the teacher was never open to having a discussion on alternate points

of view relating to the course content, Denise struggled with exams in deciding whether to indulge the teacher by providing the answer Denise thought the teacher was looking for or the answer Denise thought was the correct answer. Denise felt silenced because there was no room for her views in the classroom.

Maya also believed her teacher did not value her contributions to the classroom: “He somehow was always making remarks about the fact that I just wasn’t reading it [the literature] right.” Rather than engaging Maya by having a dialogue about how she interpreted the course readings, he just dismissed her interpretations of the course readings entirely.

Teachers also undervalue students when they do not believe in their students’ capacity to learn. More troubling is when the undervaluing is a result of discriminatory beliefs. Denise felt this was the case with her professor: “So the woman came in...she introduced herself to us, and the very first thing she said when she was reviewing the syllabus was ‘I just feel like this is too much work for you people.’ ” And this is a predominantly African American class and she was White. Denise was upset that the professor was lowering her standards for the course based on the racial characteristics of the students and discriminatory ideas of what quantity and quality of work African American students are able to handle.

Use of Verbal and Non-Verbal Forms of Communication to Silence Students

Patterns of verbal communication were important factors in the participants’ experiences. Maya and Denise shared patterns of verbal communication their teachers used to silence them. One form of verbal communication was the use of verbal confrontations. Maya’s teacher asked her to step outside of the classroom to speak to her about her paper. This request was made in front of students during class and made her feel she was being put on the spot. Denise’s teacher was a bit more flagrant with her verbal communication by referring to students as “you people.” Denise felt this was discriminatory because the teacher was White and addressed the predominantly African American classroom in that way.

Participants were also aware of nonverbal forms of communication that their teachers used to silence them. Both Maya and Turquoise pointed out how their teachers avoided eye contact with them so as not to recognize them in class when each of them raised their hand to speak and share something with the class.

Denise experienced many more confrontational forms of nonverbal communication. Denise shared, “So she [the teacher] was standing right in front of my desk, and put her hand literally inches from my face, and I turned my face, I didn’t say anything to her.” According to Denise, the professor put her hand in Denise’s face a few times during the course of the semester. Denise thought this was inappropriate and disrespectful behavior from the teacher and recognized how this was a way for the teacher to silence her.

Internalization of Conflict and Oppression

Turquoise and Maya experienced some form of internalization as a reaction to being silenced. They shared how they doubted and blamed themselves in the situation to some extent when they felt silenced or marginalized.

Turquoise stated, “I’m a kind of like a people pleaser, so my natural reaction then, was to try even harder. You know, to try to speak more, to try to get myself noticed more.” She also said, “I’ve had very intimidating professors, and I’ve just learned to not speak.” The fact that Turquoise tried harder may be a sign that she has internalized some negative self-perceptions of herself as a student and as a person.

Maya showed some signs that she might have internalized some of the conflict as well: “I guess at first you go through different emotions . . . at first it was a little confusion as to why

would this person have anything against you, if they don't even know you.” Maya then said, “I was completely devastated, I mean, I was...I went home, and I was crying.” After a talk with her mother who encouraged her to take action and stand up for herself, Maya handled the conflict differently.

Denise, on the other hand, when speaking about her classmates, showed some indication of internalization of oppression in her classmates. Denise said that the other students in her class, who were much younger than she, would tell her to “stop rocking the boat” and “ruining what could be a good thing, them not having to do any work” when she challenged her professor. She felt as if the other students in the class also tried to silence her and bought into the idea that the class needed to be “dumbed down” as the teacher had expressed. However, when Denise turned to her advisor for assistance, she did not find a different response:

It hurt; it really hurt.... especially the advisor. The advisor and I had a personal relationship. She was very African-centered. She had an African name. She wore African clothes....So I was thinking she would understand some of the things that I was going through, and her whole thing was, just don't rock the boat; be quiet and get out of the class.

Denise talked about how maybe in the case of her advisor it was a “generational thing” with the way she was raised and the period she grew up in.

Conclusions

The stories shared by participants in this study shows disconnect between teachers and students. The disconnect reinforced the teachers’ position of authority and power in the classroom to the point that it negated learners’ abilities and beliefs, and ultimately marginalized and silenced them (Sheared & Sissel, 2001). By negating students’ abilities and beliefs, the teachers are left to be the sole source of knowledge in the classroom and a banking system of education is maintained (Freire, 2003).

A banking system of education leads to internalization of the oppressor (Freire, 2003), as was evident in the stories of the participants in this study. “The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being.... They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized” (Freire, 2003, p. 48). Internalization of the oppressor may have led to a major research constraint in this study: gaining access to participants. Students may have been reluctant to share stories that involved their professors out of fear of retaliation or other consequences. Or students may not have had the opportunity to reflect on their educational experiences, which is necessary to understand how they may have been marginalized in the classroom. When students do not reflect on their educational experiences, the power structures embedded in higher education remain uncontested. Students then become agents of their oppression and their voices are silenced.

To encourage student voices to emerge and provide a place for those voices in the higher education classroom, educators should engage in critical reflection and critical teaching. Being critically reflective involves honestly thinking about the ways power influences educational transactions and how one’s assumptions may work the interest of both students and the teachers themselves (Brookfield, 1995). Critical reflection also involves contemplating how to promote the inclusion and participation of all students so that students’ needs are mutually met (Bell, 1997). Critical teaching focuses on empowerment of individuals, particularly individuals whose power and resources are shortchanged by existing social, political, and economic structures (Griffiths, 1998). Critical teaching is possible when the authority of knowledge vested in the teacher’s role shifts to include students as equally legitimate sources of knowledge (Tisdell,

Hanley & Taylor, 2000). Teaching principles that empower students include student-centered learning, attention to social relations in the classroom, and valuing personal growth, awareness, and change (Adams, 1997). The unique perspectives contributed by individual participants and as a group enriches educators' understanding of the diversity of perspectives on learning and teaching (Tennant, 2000).

References

- Adams, M. (1997). Pedagogical frameworks for social justice education. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, & P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (pp. 30-43). New York: Routledge.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bell, L. A. (1997). Theoretical foundations for social education. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, & P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (pp. 3-15). New York: Routledge.
- Brookfield, S. (2006). Authenticity and power. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 111, 5-16.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Freire, P. (2003). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.
- Griffiths, M. (1998). *Educational research for social justice: Getting off the fence*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Johnson-Bailey, J. (2001). The power of race and gender: Black women's struggle and survival in higher education. In R. M. Cervero & A. L. Wilson (Eds.), *Power in practice: Adult education and the struggle for knowledge and power in society* (pp. 126-144). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Johnson-Bailey, J., & Alfred, M. V. (2006). Transformational teaching and the practices of Black women adult educators. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*(109), 49-58.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). Assessing and evaluating qualitative research. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (pp. 18-33). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sheared, V., & Sissel, P. A. (2001). *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Tennant, M. (2000). Adult learning for self-development and change. In A. L. Wilson & E. R. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 87-100). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tisdell, E. J., Hanley, M. S., & Taylor, E. W. (2000). Different perspectives on teaching for critical consciousness. In A. L. Wilson & E. R. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 132-146). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.