THINKING CREATIVELY ABOUT "RETREAT" TIME IN UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

As a Communication professor and education researcher I spend a significant amount of time studying, practicing and discussing the benefits of collaborative and group learning. Still, when thinking about innovative ways to encourage critical thought and learning I have come to appreciate the value of what might be called *retreat* time—time to be quiet and to have some access to personal space in the classroom. I have also thought about what retreat time can look like when art-making becomes part of the picture. In this article I present a case for building retreat time into classroom experiences in conjunction with collaborative activities. I draw from existing literature, my own teaching practices, and my educational research in which I engage in arts-related methods that integrate both retreat and collaboration. First, I contemplate the value of silence in learning and strategies educators can use to create room for constructive silence. I then consider the need for personal space in which students can listen, process, and critically reflect upon what they are learning. Finally, I describe an adaptation of an art-making activity that allows for retreat *and* collaboration in an effort to help students articulate their ideas, questions, and interpretations of theories and concepts they explore in the classroom. Throughout I share personal observations and reflections regarding the implementation of retreat time in my own practices suggesting possible areas of formal teaching and learning research.

Introduction

As a Communication professor and education researcher I spend a significant amount of time studying, practicing and discussing the benefits of collaborative and group learning. Still, when thinking about innovative ways to encourage critical thought and learning I have come to appreciate the value of what might be called *retreat* time. In this context, retreat time refers to opportunities to be quiet and to have some access to personal space in the classroom. I have also contemplated what retreat time can look like when art-making becomes part of the picture. In this article I present a case for building retreat time into classroom experiences in conjunction with collaborative activities. To do so, I draw from existing literature, my own teaching practices in the field of Communication, and my educational research in which I engage in arts-related methods that integrate both retreat and collaboration. The article proceeds as follows. First, I contemplate the value of silence in critical learning and strategies educators can use to create room for constructive silence. I then consider the need for some degree of personal space in which students can listen, process, and critically reflect upon what they are learning. Finally, I describe an adaptation of an art-making activity that allows for retreat *and* collaboration in an effort to help students articulate their ideas, questions, and interpretations of theories and concepts they explore in the classroom. Throughout I share personal observations and reflections regarding the

implementation of retreat time in my own classrooms and research spaces suggesting possible areas of formal teaching and learning research.

Constructive Silence in the Classroom

Part of my teaching responsibilities includes delivering two courses through which students learn how to design and facilitate communication training programs. When I ask students to share concerns they have about facilitation many indicate that their greatest fear is that "participants will be silent". Such feelings are not unusual. Both professors and students often describe a sense of awkward silence that fills a classroom when there is no verbal response to educators' questions or invitations for group discussion. An uneasy reaction to classroom silences is understandable. "Part of the problem is the fact that most American and European educators are accustomed to thinking of classrooms as discourse communities and tend to devalue the other side of discourse which is silence" (Vassilopoulos & Konstantinidis, 2012, p.91). Others concur. In reference to Western teaching practices, Ollin (2008) writes: "Silence, as an absence of speech, is often problematised in a classroom situation, with the underlying implication that classrooms are for talking—as long as the talking is under the control of the teacher" (p. 267).

The discomfort associated with silence can be related to how it is interpreted (Ollin, 2008). If educators and students assume that silence suggests a lack of knowledge, concern, or interest they may have a negative reaction to the quiet, surmising it signals discord or an absence of learning. If silence is interpreted as a dislike or fear of speaking, there may be attempts to intervene and encourage more talk. Certainly, there are instances when silence is an indication that something is impeding students' learning and it needs to be addressed accordingly. However, Ollin (2008) challenges the broad-sweeping assumption that silence inherently suggests disengagement. In fact, as with verbal language, the meaning of silence is subjective and can have multiple connotations (Alerby & Alerby, 2003). Without asking, educators cannot know for certain why students choose to be quiet. Furthermore, it is possible that students' silences signal quiet participation. Caranfa (2004) describes silence as a foundation of learning. It gives space for listening, reflecting, and being quiet—behaviours that when effectively practiced can help students review and process what they are hearing, reading and observing. In silence students can initiate the process of critical reflection. Silence also affords students the chance to formulate responses.

In some cases, silence itself is a message. Zembylas and Michaelides (2004) emphasize "the important role silence plays in signifying human experience that is inexpressible" (p. 209). They elaborate:

> The most passionate and exhilarating moments of learning have a built-in sense of mystery, of something that is inexpressible. The very fact that a teacher calls attention to silence means the students are deliberately drawn into learning as creators of meaning. There is no way we can express or describe something accurately and completely in words. In fact, the very words we use to describe it often remove us even further from that. (p. 209)

Failure to explicitly acknowledge the expression that potentially occurs in silence may inadvertently stifle students who thrive when given time for quietness. It may veil the meaning embedded in their silence. In turn, the opportunity to help students learn how to engage in constructive and meaningful silence will be missed.

Silence has value in and of itself in our daily lives. Lightman (2005) argues that we live in a wired world and that many of us are connected in some capacity or another to others many hours of the waking day. There are indeed benefits in our capacity to be linked and engaged be it though technology or face-to-face. Still, Lightman notes that we sometimes feel unable to retreat and claim quiet personal space. Yet he believes that retreat is possible when we become aware or mindful of moments from our lives where we have felt stillness and silence. He urges us to reflect on conscious moments of stillness when silence freed us to focus inward. In addition to giving us room to connect with our inner self, in these moments of mindful quiet, learning can happen. Educators can help themselves and their students find that quiet awareness.

Corrigan (2011) claims that silence should be woven into educators' personal and classroom practices. What, then, might such practices look like? First, Corrigan (2011) recommends that in their own learning and professional development educators step back and take quiet time to reflect on the research, materials and other professional development tools that inform how they teach. Points of consideration include: What in their own study makes the most sense to them? What ideas might they challenge? And how can educators' own learning and research be integrated into their classroom teaching? Second, time for silence before and after classes offers important moments for educators to learn through silence. In anticipation of classes educators can contemplate the goals they hope to achieve, the fears they hold, and the confidence they feel as they prepare to teach. Following a class, they can set aside a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on their perceptions of successes and setbacks, and moments that surprised, disappointed, and pleased them. In addition, they can use the time to think about what they would do the same and different in future classes.

Appreciation and time for silences can be embedded in educators' teaching practices. Initially, it is helpful to explicitly state to students that when used constructively, silence is a valuable learning tool. Inform students of the potential benefits and assure them they will have ample time throughout a course to silently engage with the material they are studying. In other words, give them permission to be quiet. A simple way to honour silence is to encourage students to take time to think about their responses when questions are posed (Corrigan, 2011). Let them know it is okay if no one answers immediately.

There are other ways to integrate retreat time into class practices. One of the specific strategies I employ is five minutes of silent time at the beginning of class. Once the day's agenda is announced, students have time to review readings or other materials that will be discussed, check on homework assignments that had to be completed and jot down comments, questions, or discussion topics they wish to raise. Alternatively students can use the time to simply rest and attempt to quiet psychological noise that can impede learning. There is no guarantee that this strategy will entirely prepare them for class and eliminate the distractions that often follow students into their learning spaces. Still it can help.

Since introducing this practice I have noticed that students are more readily prepared to discuss readings and materials covered in class. Their nonverbal behaviour suggests that they are less distracted than they appear when I do not include the five minute silent time. For example, they do not check their mobile phones and search through their personal belongings as frequently. These are observations and not conclusive evidence. Formal research is needed to determine if indeed the option of time to retreat at the beginning of class does have an impact on students' readiness to engage in learning.

Another known tactic that can be helpful prior to small or large group discussions is to use a think-pair-share activity (Goldsmith, 2013). Initially students are given discussion questions that they can think about individually. Then, after a few minutes, they are paired with another student to talk over their thoughts, questions, and ideas about the topics. Others who advocate for the think-pair-share model contend that thinking time is a critical element of the learning process (Hinson, 1990). Having time to think alone in class as topics are being introduced and then try out their ideas with one other student can foster more comfort and confidence when the activity moves on to the small or large group discussions. Anecdotally, and in keeping with existing literature across educational levels and disciplines (Thaman, Dhillon, Saggar, Gupta,& Kaur, 2013; McTighe & Lyman, 1988), I have noticed that there seems to be more input from all members when students have time to work quietly and then with a partner prior to forming groups.

Corrigan (2011) remarks, "All words become noise when there are too many of them in too small a space of time" (p. 9). In my experience, building quiet time into daily classroom practices has proven to be a valuable use of time. However, there is no guarantee quiet time will always be used constructively or that it will be equally effective for all students. Research can examine both benefits and potential limitations of the kinds of strategies presented here. Such work will help educators determine the best ways to make room for silence that unclutters teaching space so deeper learning can occur.

Honouring Personal Space in the Classroom

Upitis (2010) contends that the architecture of schools deeply influences our interactions, growth and learning. Beyond the physical structure of buildings, educators committed to innovative and effective teaching typically acknowledge that a classroom's physical set up has an impact on learning (Neill & Etheridge, 2008). For example, various types of furniture and arrangements may influence the kinds of interaction that will occur in classrooms (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008). Therefore, if educators want to facilitate positive retreat they need to consider proxemics which is the use of space (Hall, 1966). Harrop and Turpin (2013) might refer to such consideration as attention to placemaking which they say "is about people and their experiences while occupying a given space" (p. 60).

Harrop and Turpin (2013) studied the use of informal learning spaces and found that some students look for places to retreat when engaged in learning. In some instances, this refers to private, quiet spaces. However, this is not always the case. They write: "retreat can, but does not necessarily refer to sound levels and individual study" (p.69). For example, some students like to work alone in a place with other people (consider individuals who frequent bustling coffee shops to engage alone in

their work). In other instances, Harrop and Turpin (2013) found that when working in small groups or dyads some students want the option to find private places to meet and engage in their work.

Although they studied informal learning spaces, the needs for retreat identified by Harrop and Turpin (2013) can be accommodated in classrooms as well without compromising space designs that encourage collaboration. Classroom space needs to be flexible enough to suit learning activities that involve large groups, small groups and individuals (Hunter, 2005; Haskin, 2010). Flexible seating arrangements are challenging when furniture is secured in place and this can negatively impact students' class experiences and learning (Lei, 2010). I have found it is helpful to acknowledge with students the constraints of fixed seating arrangements and to brainstorm with them creative ways to use the space so that needs for both collaboration and retreat time can be met. For instance, I have given groups of students permission to move outside of the classroom when they wanted to work together in a private space. I have also used extra chairs in the classroom to set up places where students could find some personal space during reflection activities if that is their preference. We then move closer together again when engaging in group conversations.

It is somewhat easier to be flexible in classrooms that have moveable furniture. Depending on the activity, educators can arrange desks in clusters when engaged in small group work, pairs when working in dyads, and circles when facilitating large group discussions. Arranging seats in rows for silent reading, writing, listening and contemplation may be appreciated by students who seek retreat time during which they do not have to interact verbally and nonverbally to a great extent with others. Changing the seating arrangement multiple times during a session allows for collaborative activities and alone time activities as well as large group discussions. And there may be benefits when students help with the rearrangement. Neill & Etheridge (2008) reference a teacher who suggests that when students assist with the classroom seating arrangements it facilitates their active involvement in their learning.

Humans have unique needs when it comes to personal space (Hall, 1966) and it can vary across cultures, gender, age, and other factors that influence individual comfort levels (Kaya & Burgess, 2007; Gibson, Harris, & Werner, 1993). While it may be a challenge to address all students' space needs as part of their retreat time in a single classroom, how space can be constructed to respect learners and encourage various kinds of learning is worth examination.

Art-Making Activity

The case for retreat time exists. This does not, however, diminish the value of collaboration. A goal for educators is to find ways to intermix both. Arts-related researchers including those in the education field, recognize that art-making is a process and forum through which to critically examine, self-reflect upon and discuss with others ideas, positions, experiences and perceptions (Casey, 2009; Greenwood, 2012; Brann-Barrett, 2013). In essence, themed art-making in groups allows for both retreat time and collaboration. In my own educational research I worked with young people between the ages of 15 and 27. They came together in small and large groups, and through a process of discussion coupled with individual and collaborative art-making, they contemplated their role in community engagement. Participants critically reflected on and shared their ideas using craft and media tools to create pieces of

art that articulated their own experiences and perceptions of the subject. The research process allowed ample time for quiet reflection and space to spread out and be alone while still connecting with the group. Furthermore there were built-in opportunities for conversation and collaboration with each other. This research technique adapts nicely as a teaching and learning method making it a well-suited activity when the intention is to merge retreat and collaboration in classroom learning.

I use art-making as a way to allow students to critically reflect upon broad foundational concepts being covered in class, such as media, health, family, communication, entrepreneurship, science, economy, sustainability, justice, gender, culture, and education. The exercise encourages students to identify ideological, cultural and personal assumptions embedded in discipline-related constructs and theories. To start, I suggest to students that one element of critical thinking is reflection on how their personal experiences influence how they understand and attach meaning to the topics they learn about in university. I then give them a list of incomplete statements. For example, if they are studying learning styles I present the following statements:

- When I was child I learned best when . . .
- As an adult I learn best when . . .
- Something that makes learning easier for me . . .
- The perfect place to learn is . . .
- For me as a learner/educator, the perfect classroom looks like . . .
- What I like about learning/teaching in groups is . . .
- What makes it difficult for me to learn/teach in groups is . . .
- What I like about retreat time when learning/teaching is . . .
- What about "retreat time" makes it difficult for me to learn/teach is . . .

I encourage students to write responses to any of the statement that are of particular interest to them. After they have had time to reflect on the statements, I invite them to use a wide variety of provided craft supplies to create a visual depiction of what "learning" means to them. The materials include but are not limited to paper, canvasses, fabric, bottles, beads, buttons, pipe cleaners, foam, paint, magazines, stencils, crayons, markers, glue, tape and other utensils. I often bring photographs or actual pieces of art created by former students who have engaged in the activity and who have given permission for their work to be viewed by others. Looking at other students' projects can help trigger ideas.

I clarify two points prior to the exercise to reassure students who may be reluctant to participate. First, I discuss the pedagogical value of arts-related learning and reassure students who may question the benefits. For example, I explain to students that arts-related activities provide a wide spectrum of communication channels through which people can express themselves. Therefore, engaging in such activities can enhance their multi-media literacy skills (Brann-Barrett, 2013). Second, I assure students—particularly those who worry about their ability to create art—that I do not judge their artistic capabilities. I tell them that throughout the exercise they are free to chat with one another, ask questions, move around the room and think quietly about the concept and what it means to them. I

explicitly state that the focus is the process, not the finished piece. There is no pressure to "hurry up" and I assure them that their creations will not be graded.

Ollin (2008) notes that some teachers see kinesthetic activities such as working with clay and drawing as ways of creating space for silence through which students can think creatively about concepts and ideas. This appears to happen in my classes. During the arts-related activity there are periods of extended silence. Students spread out around the room, some working physically close together while others go off on their own. They periodically say they enjoy the silence as it helps them think. More formal research can examine if students are more comfortable with silence when they are engaged in activity. In the meantime, these observations align with the reactions of research participants taking part in the same kind of exercise. When I use this technique as a research method (described above) participants claim that the quiet time gives them a chance to reflect on the ideas they are exploring and the silence does not feel awkward because they are actually "doing" something (Brann-Barrett, 2013).

Simultaneously, students who engage in art-making in my classes periodically share thoughts and discussions ensue. In these instances the dialogue is initiated by the students. Interestingly, they appear to be invested in contributing to the conversation, perhaps more so than if the professor was leading the conversation. Further inquiry through research is needed to assess if students take more of an ownership role in classroom conversations they initiate.

After a set amount of time, students are invited to share with classmates their art—regardless of its stage of completion. They can discuss the meanings they hoped to convey, some of the factors that influence their interpretations, and how their personal perspective regarding the topics we study has an impact on their own learning. At the end of the session, students take their finished or unfinished work with them so they may continue to critically reflect on their own and with others.

Students' informal responses to this activity tend to be positive. They claim it feels relaxing and allows them to de-stress even though they believe they are still learning. Some have said it allows them to think about the concepts they are studying in new ways that are sometimes hard to express with words alone. While these comments are reassuring it is possible that some students do not like the activity or may have suggestions regarding how it is delivered. Even when educators encourage open feedback regarding classroom practices, students are still part of a hierarchy that places the professor in a position of power. Therefore some students may be reluctant to state their feelings to the person who assigns their grade. Hence, formal research is needed to glean a more in-depth sense of both the potential benefits and limitations of art-making activities as a way to allow for both retreat and collaboration in learning.

A Final Note

My intention in this article was to argue the value of retreat time in the classroom and to suggest some practical ways for educators to incorporate its main components—silences and personal space—into their practices. Next steps require more formal research to assess the place of retreat time in teaching and learning. I contend that such work is important and relevant. Our society offers more opportunity to

interact with others worldwide than ever before and classroom technologies enable students to link into innovative and exciting learning networks. We encourage our students to embrace these opportunities and learn how to voice their place in such relationships—as we should. I suggest, however, that along with encouraging students to take advantage of new and exciting collaborative learning innovations we need to teach them the value of retreat time. As Lightman (2005) notes, "We have grown accustomed to a constant background of machine noise wherever we are: cars, radios, televisions, fax machines, telephones, and cell phones—buzzes, hums, beeps, clatters, and whines" (p. 189). In a noisy world, silence in one's own space can afford students the necessary chance to pause and think deeply about what they are learning. Such reflection may help to better prepare them to engage in knowledge-building with others both inside and outside the classroom.

Acknowledgements

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