BUILDING INTENTIONAL SILENCE INTO CLASSROOMS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE AND ACCESSIBLE DISCUSSIONS

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Abstract

This paper presents the concept of silent discussions and offers insight into how the method can support linguistic autonomy, accessibility, and student accountability. It also outlines techniques used to improve discussion outcomes in secondary and other classrooms. Silence, while seemingly counterintuitive in classrooms and other spaces where writing happens, can benefit our students' quality of discussions and encourage them to engage more in classroom discussions. *Silent Discussions* is a method of communication adopted from both wide discourse on freewriting and Silicon Valley's obsession with efficiency and alternative practices. In these silent discussions, students respond to a shared discussion document through annotations, review their colleagues' responses in silence, and finally join a *loud* discussion that extends ideas and threads from the silent discussion. Building more intentional silence into classrooms can make discussions focused, accessible, and equitable for our middle and high school students, including those who may be multilingual, have social anxiety, need more time to respond, and even those who emerged from the pandemic with preferences for asynchronous communication.

Keywords: discussion, silence, linguistic autonomy, freewriting, accessibility

Classroom discussions do not always go as intended, and sometimes, they fail. Even with the best of intentions, the most interesting discussion questions, and the perfect pause, many teachers have experienced a discussion that was less than productive. Maybe these less than perfect classroom discussions happened because the loudest student in the room had so much to say on the topic that no one else could share. Or perhaps no one seemed to have any ideas to contribute until one of the shyer students suggested one, but then no one could think of anything except that idea. It is even possible that the discussion moved from topic to topic so quickly that many students wanted to contribute but felt it was too late by the time the teacher called on them. More recently, classroom discussions have often faltered due to students' reticence for verbal expression—the combined product of students completing siloed work during the pandemic and relying more frequently on asynchronous chat channels for communication.

I have watched many discussions fail in my own classes, including in the ways mentioned above. And when they fail, I feel like I have failed too. Those feelings are legitimate because discussions serve such an important role in our classrooms and at all levels. Discussions help students comprehend concepts (Murphy et al., 2016), create meaning (Halliday, 1975), negotiate complex information relationships (Alvermann et al., 1996), and learn to work with one another (Alvermann et al., 1996). When a discussion is not productive or does not reach every student, that failure seems critical. Rethinking how students engage in classroom discussion in the post-pandemic years[1] provides teachers with an opportunity to reconfigure their approaches not only to account for the needs of all learners, but also to account for shifting student discussion behaviors and preferences. Specifically, asking them to discuss in

[1]I use post-pandemic years in this article not to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic is over, but instead to locate the period of years immediately after the beginning of the pandemic.

silence can improve our discussion outcomes and pedagogy by ensuring that those discussions are accessible to more students.

What's Wrong With Traditional Verbal Discussions?

Many teachers enjoy traditional verbal discussion and dialogue. It may be that teachers were high-performing students in school and loved speaking in class, but they also know the value of verbal discussions, are confident in their ideas, and have outgrown the fear of being wrong. Further, teachers know that public speaking skills develop through practice, and they appreciate the value of engaging with information in different ways and that doing so helps with comprehension and retention. They also understand that being presented with new knowledge, or experiencing cognitive dissonance, can help us grow. Further, teachers realize that discussions are not about finding the singular answer but are about *problem exploring*, something Wardle (2012) describes as the process of arriving at an answer and the transformation that comes with that process. These are some of the attractive aspects of traditional verbal discussions.

However, there are quite a few problems with traditional verbal discussion too. Oftentimes, only a few students dominate the discussion (Choi et al., 2023; Gallupe et al., 1992). It may be true that teachers appreciate those students' ideas and rely on them to help keep the class lively, but if discussions include contributions from only a few students, then the discussion fails to engage everyone. Additionally, when only a few students dominate the discussion, this often means that introverts, students with anxiety, neurodivergent learners, English Language Learners (ELLs), or those who just need a little more time to think do not get to share (Townsend & Fu, 1998; Wood, 2017). One reason not everyone gets to engage in the discussion is because there is only one communicative channel being used at a time in traditional verbal discussions (Behrens & Kret, 2019). Additionally, side conversations that may be valuable, interesting, and culturally relevant, feel taboo or do not happen at all (Mikami et al., 2017). Importantly, side conversations can also build social belonging, which is important to retention in secondary classrooms (Williams et al., 2020).

Another problem with traditional verbal discussions is that the conversation moves too quickly to have everyone weigh in on the topics (Victorino, 2020), so some students who have good ideas to contribute are not able to share. Finally, it is easy for production blocking to occur, where students conform to the loudest students' ideas (Nijstad et al., 2003). Fewer ideas are actually proposed in this scenario, and the best ideas do not always bubble to the top. However, when teachers shift classroom discussions into silent spaces that have unlimited communicative channels, allow for side conversations, and encourage all students to share, they can mitigate many of those problems.

Defining the Silent Discussion

The concept of silent discussions, while a rather new term, grows out of the discourse around freewriting, specifically James Moffett's (1968) and Peter Elbow's (1973) advocacy for engaging in a silent conversation with one's own mind on paper. But other scholars have advocated for more collaborative freewriting models. Hunt (2005) described a process where students annotate the free-written responses of their peers and then pass their document to another student, where that student then engages with the additional annotated responses. More recently, in Silicon Valley, technology companies often provide teams with discussion documents to review in silence before a more traditional discussion to make meetings more efficient (Rogelberg & Kreamer, 2019; Victorino, 2020). In both contexts, these silent discussions encourage everyone to engage with each other's ideas through contributing to a shared discussion document, reviewing colleagues' ideas in silence, and finally taking part in a verbal discussion.

Importantly, silent discussions rely on two essential components: text-based responses and group engagement with one another's responses. These are important to an effective silent discussion because, as Murphy et al. (2016) found, text-based, small-group discussions—like the ones that happen during silent discussions—promote students' comprehension and critical and analytic thinking and can lead to students developing better thinking and discussion skill sets. To accomplish a discussion in a silent space, teachers can draw upon previous and current models of silent discussions.

How to Run a Silent Discussion in the Classroom

Silent discussions can work in face-to-face, asynchronous, and synchronous online courses, though the majority of secondary courses that moved online during the pandemic are likely face-to-face again. Students can use paper and pen and share and annotate their discussion documents, as Hunt (2005) offered, or they can continue using digital tools since many students have grown to prefer online discussions in the years after the height of the pandemic. An additional bonus to using digital discussion tools is the accessibility they provide in recording discussions for students to review as a study aid. These silent discussions can work in many secondary and post-secondary classrooms. They can even work with colleagues and faculty learning communities.

For a silent discussion to work well, everyone involved in the discussion needs to prepare. Ask students to prepare by brainstorming ideas on a topic in writing. In my own classes, which typically include secondary students transitioning to college, I ask students to create a one-page response to a reading or set of readings. Then, I decide which responses I want to ask everyone to discuss, and I offer this document to the class as the discussion document. The document might consist of just one student's one-page response, perhaps the discussion leader for that day, or it can include multiple students' one-page responses merged into a single document that small groups or the entire class will discuss.

Smaller groups have the ability to help instructors scaffold the "release of responsibility" for the discussion, giving students more responsibility in running their own group discussions and helping them build autonomy (Murphy et al., 2016, p. 27). To offer students this autonomy, teachers can model good discussion practices, periodically ask students to reflect on to whom and how they are responding, and provide feedback on a few early student responses. Doing this carefully can provide students the autonomy to run their own discussion space, but it also allows teachers to stay close enough to the process to intervene if necessary.

Silent discussion documents can be housed online where everyone has access, or for more traditional approaches, they can be printed as a document or packet of documents to fit your classroom's modality needs. In my classroom, we use Google Docs because it offers easy annotation, and many school districts use Google Drive and Google products already, which makes it a good match for many literacy teachers (see Figure 1). Another similar technology is Perusall®, which has some additional features like built-in grading and ensures comments are not deleted by other students, but it does require a paid institutional subscription. However, using pen and paper accomplishes similar goals and does not require students to have devices in the classroom.

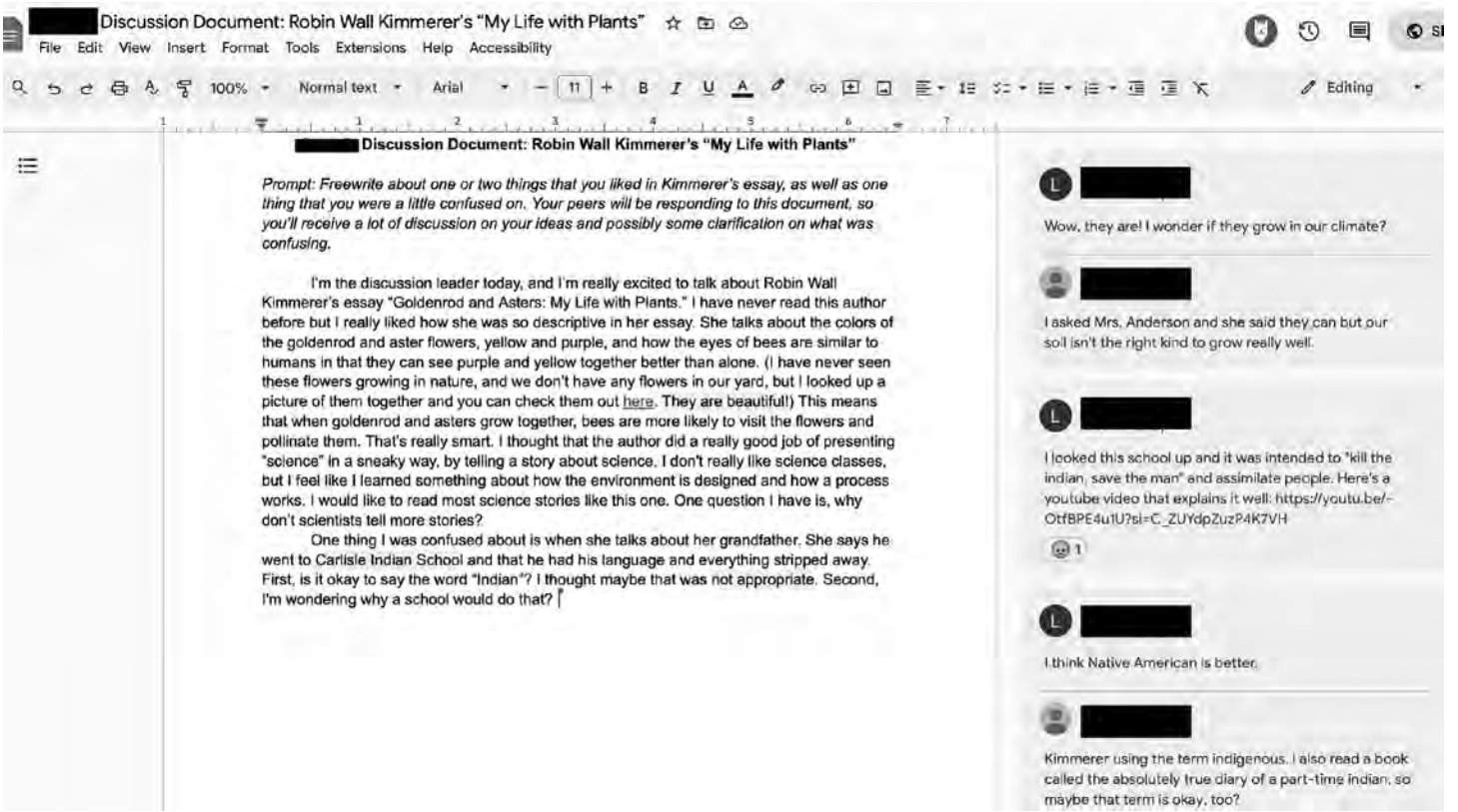

Figure 1. ***Exemplar of a Silent Discussion Document***

Regardless of whether teachers use one student's response, many student responses, digital spaces, or pen and paper, silent discussions have two important aspects. First, students spend time responding silently to the ideas in the discussion document, and then students use additional time to respond to each other's responses. This portion of a silent discussion—which Hunt (2005) terms "inkshedding"—is called the "hearing":

> That "hearing" is important. What is often overlooked in this situation is the importance of *reading*. Writing, of course, had been seen as central from the very beginning, in the origins of the practice as freewriting (which might or might not ever be read). But what differentiates the social practice of inkshedding from what we might call the expressivist practice of freewriting is that the text is *read*. And even more, that the text is read in what we can characterize as "dialogic" ways—that is, read *for what it says, dialogically*, not in order to evaluate it or to "help" the writer "improve" her text. And because the reading occurs immediately, and in public, the writer has a good chance to come to realize this. (Hunt, 2005, n.p.)

According to Hunt (2005), if students respond only to the discussion document, they run the risk of not really hearing each other; in order to value everyone in the discussion, students need to hear each other. So, if the discussion document is brief enough, this might require 10 minutes of commenting, 10 minutes of responding to classmates' responses, and another 10 or 15 minutes for a *loud* discussion.

When teachers run silent discussions, it is important to remember that silence is key. Although my college-bound students often opt for some quiet background music, verbalized thoughts or questions should be limited because students are engaging in the discussion silently. Their communicative channels are already activated, and it is important not to overload them cognitively (Sweller, 2011). Teachers can set an appropriate amount of time for the silent discussion based on how long or complicated the discussion document is, and if students are using digital documents like Google Docs or Perusall, teachers can view the discussion as it is happening on their screens and can choose whether to join in or when to intervene if necessary.

Time to Get Loud

Once the silent discussion is over, teachers can follow up with a loud discussion. This part will feel very much like a traditional verbal discussion where students can share their thoughts aloud for the whole class, except for one key point—everyone has already participated in the silent part of the discussion, so many ideas have already been shared. At this point, the instructor, who has been watching the discussion happen in real time, can synthesize some of the discussion threads for the class. Synthesizing threads for students ensures everyone is aware of the threads that the teacher may want to prioritize to meet curriculum standards, but it can also highlight those side conversations that students may be interested in. This way, everyone leaves the discussion having contributed, but everyone also leaves with a fuller understanding of the topic.

If the discussion has been recorded through digital tools like Google Docs, the instructor can even display important exchanges with a projector to spur or guide the loud discussion. Overall, the group can use traditional discussion methods more effectively now that everyone has already weighed in on the issues and has the context needed to exchange ideas. This helps those quieter students build the confidence to speak up, but it also means that even if those louder students take up most of the verbal discussion space, the quieter students have already spoken. Essentially, participating in a silent discussion benefits more students than traditional verbal discussion alone.

When I host silent discussions with my students, the benefits are real. We spend less time on minor issues, like defining terms or explaining main ideas that students struggled with, because they already did that work in the silent discussion. Additionally, our

loud discussions often draw from the peripheral conversations that happened in the discussion documents. This not only brings alternative responses and ideas to our conversation, but it also brings to the forefront those side conversations that research shows are often culturally valuable (Townsend & Fu, 1998).

As a teacher, I like that I can address friction, like disrespectful responses, misunderstandings of the text, or a lack of participation, in real time. Students seem more invested because they have control of what and how they respond. Because students are responding to other students' freely written ideas, they are not responding to every idea on the page but rather selecting the parts that are most thought-provoking. There is a good opportunity to build student autonomy and support student choice in these silent discussions.

Autonomy, Multimodality, Accessibility, and Accountability

Research on biliteracy shows that when students' primary language is supported in the classroom, they have more motivation in literacy tasks and tend to produce more oral responses, even more than their non-biliterate classmates (Griskell et al., 2022). Silent discussions can support linguistic autonomy because teachers can encourage students to respond silently in whatever language or approach to language they choose (Anzaldúa, 1987; Baker-Bell, 2020). Additionally, using small groups and text-based discussion documents allows teachers the ability to help guide their multilingual students through the process when necessary. Budde et al. (2022) found that this supported effective text-based discussions, and Ossa-Parra et al. (2016) determined it helped increase student-to-student discourse in discussions.

Beyond supporting linguistic autonomy, using Google Docs or other digital technology to store and filter student responses (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007) allows students to create discussion responses that are multimodal in nature. They can easily use bulleted lists and white space—typographical features that encourage reader focus—and they can embed links, images, surveys, and videos to engage with their peers. Offering students the space to engage with multimodal elements provides further opportunities for students to consider the rhetorical situation of the discussion. Who is their audience? What visual elements, modalities, and formatting will be most relevant to their audience's needs?

Making these rhetorical decisions helps students put into practice the idea that "language (words, literacy, texts) gives meaning to contexts and, dialectically, contexts give meaning to language" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 2). But these multimodal conversations are also recorded in the document in a way that loud discussions are not, which allows students the opportunity to go back to join the conversation later. This might include students who needed a little more time to craft that perfect response or students who were absent from class, as they can still participate in the discussion by reading and responding to their colleagues' responses.

Teachers can provide a link from their learning management system or Google Classroom to a Google folder with all the silent discussion documents organized by date or topic. If silent discussions are happening on paper documents, teachers might find a place in the classroom to store those discussion documents for student use, perhaps through an organized file folder system or pinned on a "Discussion Corner" wall.

Recording these silent discussions offers an opportunity for more accessibility and accountability too. As already noted, silent discussions provide the opportunity to access quality discussion time since there are infinite communicative channels open at the same time. Students who need more time to come back to discussions and still contribute their ideas can do this with silent discussions. For teachers who have students with low-vision accommodations, or ELLs and others who might benefit from hearing the conversation while reading it, Google Docs works with screen readers to offer accessible commenting and collaborating.

Beyond the accessibility of these silent discussions, the method also prioritizes student accountability (Alvermann et al., 1996). If students want to review what was said in the discussion as they prepare for tests or projects, these discussions are captured permanently for them. Capturing discussions digitally also provides the space for students to visualize their own work in the classroom, which can serve as a self-reflective tool in classrooms where students must grade themselves or account for their own course participation (Inoue, 2019; Kohn & Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2018).

Technology (Ab)Use

Anytime teachers use technology in the classroom, they must consider its affordances alongside its potential problems and any district or school-wide technology policies. Like any other online discussion or classroom workspace, silent discussions will benefit from clear parameters around etiquette and respect, and students will need proper scaffolding to respond to one another in respectful and productive ways. While previous research (Budde et al., 2022) has shown that teachers can help shape online text-based discussions procedurally in positive ways by modeling how to respond respectfully and helping work through discussion tensions, research has also made clear that when teachers are not present in these discussion spaces, students sometimes create their own agendas, including increased toxicity like racism, sexism, ableism, and other harassment. This can lead to less engagement from students (Aroyo et al., 2019). Teachers who opt to integrate silent discussions into their classrooms will need to work to ensure that those discussions are respectful.

Conclusion

Although silent discussions may feel counterintuitive in our classrooms and writing spaces (Boquet, 2002), building intentional silence into our discussion spaces can help our students develop as thinkers, writers, and supportive group members. While discussions of all kinds have benefits, silent discussions offer opportunities to generate more and alternative discourses and engage our quietest students—whether they are neurodivergent, shy, multilingual, or whether they just need a little more time to respond. By capturing these silent discussions, especially in digital spaces, these experiences can provide our students with the visual evidence they need to reflect on their own practices as learners and students, which will serve them in the future. Teachers need to show students how powerful language can be, but they can also show them that it does not always have to be loud.

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