

**Analysing Online Silence From A Social  
Cognitive Learning Perspective –  
Unveiling Learning Possibilities**

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### **Introduction:**

Students' 'silence' is an ongoing challenge that many educationists face in their classrooms. It troubles them and challenge their creative thinking to design learning environments inductive to verbal behaviour. Often the vocality of students is rewarded and seen as a sign of learning. In fact some tutors assign part of the total course grade to class discussions as a way to encourage students to talk and take part in discussions. Compared to voice, silence puzzles tutors and seem to be seen as the 'unwanted other'. In essence, tutors who reward voice, punish silence. That is to say; students who do not take part in class discussions lose part of their grade. This is a common practice at least in the women's college where my work is positioned, and tutors talk about it openly. In my own courses, voice was rewarded, and therefore unknowingly silence was punished.

This paper explores the possibility of offering new meanings to silence in educational settings, in particular online settings. Bandura's social cognitive theory is proposed as one salient way that could enrich our understanding of the silent learning experience. The discussion is purely premised on the essence of the theory, and also research carried out on and associated with online silence. Although the argument is aimed at the feminist pedagogical practice, other viewpoints on silence and voice could benefit from the discussion put forth. This is done for different reasons. First, for the real concern feminist educationists have for women learners. Second, feminists

discuss women's silence and voice elaborately, in fact the two concepts are positioned at the centre of a feminist pedagogy. And third, my own practice is situated in a women's only college where more than 7000 women attend.

It is hoped that the new meanings that emerge will inaugurate new learning possibilities for learners, and therefore initiate new learning designs which see silence not as failure to learn but as invisible learning. This discussion is important for educational technologists in general and educational designers involved in designing online environments, in particular. A general view of the ongoing discussion regarding voice and silence is given at the beginning. Mainly the construction of voice and silence within feminist literature is reported. The main point which is raised is the built in bias that favours voice over silence within face to face settings as well as online settings. In the second section, an overall view of Bandura's social cognitive theory of learning, which is premised on "the power of example", is given. Building on Bandura's theory a different way of understanding online silence is offered in the third section. Drawing on a number of research, a different interpretation of silence emerges: silent learners interact with other components in their environment. The paper ends with the conclusion premised on the eloquence of silence, and the need for a greater understanding of invisible learning.

#### **Silence versus Voice—an ongoing argument**

The idea of passivity of students in the classroom is often seen as students' failure to participate in discussions or elicit their views. In prevailing literature in general, and within the feminist literature in particular, a binary structure of voice and silence is created, and the vocality (voice) of students is often positioned opposite to students' silence. In this structure voice is always valued over silence. Within

main stream feminist literature, for example, Al-Ali (2006) explains that the two concepts, silence and voice, are hierarchically related, and while the former is favoured the latter is demeaned.

The feminist argument regarding face to face classrooms or online classrooms is based on this hierarchical relationship that binds the two separate entities. Voice is considered as an assertion of women's authority and presence. Therefore, in feminist classrooms pedagogical strategies are used so that students enter the classroom as speaking subjects. So on the one hand, voice is related to empowerment and on the other hand, silence is related to powerlessness. A dichotomy of voice/silence is hence created which bypasses the complexity and interrelatedness of the terms (Orner, 1992). This binary opposition is dangerous in Orner's view because it privileges the first term over the second. Instead, she contends that it is important to see how the two terms interrelate and how they have been constructed as opposites.

In her research Al-Ali (1999) was able to show how Kuwaiti women used their silence strategically within educational settings. In fact Kuwaiti women were well aware of their silence and they used it as a tool to guide their interest. Feminist researchers such as Lazreg (1994) and Lewis (1993) have both shown that women, within their specific contexts and locations, use silence as a strategic and survival tool. Lazreg (1994) has done extensive work with Algerian women and found that Algerian women's silence is 'eloquent'. Also Ellsworth (1992) and Orner (1992) point out such strategic silence within the educational setting. They both emphasize the complexity of the classroom environment and the shifting relations of power among the classroom members.

Trehan and Rigg (2006) stress for the need to be aware of the multiple meanings that silence serves and the different forms that it manifests. They conclude their argument saying that "Silence can be socially imposed; can be the outcome of having no voice, or having no space to speak, and is frequently the consequence of being marginalized. Yet it is also not sufficient to attribute silence to a passively borne oppression. Silence can be an individual's active strategy of resistance or of survival." (p. 11)

Within online settings, and within feminist research in particular, the dichotomy of voice and silence seems to be strongly present. Al-Ali (2006) contends that silence seems to be structurally unfavoured within computer mediated communication and networked learning arguments. Indeed there seems to be a built-in bias against silence within online communication. The feminist online argument also seems to be based on favouring voice over silence, and considering voice as an assertion of women's authority and presence. It is an argument which is extended from their face-to-face argument. Al-Ali explains that the feminist online argument is simplistic and linear; it presents women as reactive rather than active agents. In fact the way silence and voice are constructed deprives women of their agency.

As a result of the above discussion two fundamental aspects are considered in the argument that follows. First and most important, face-to-face communication will not be compared with online computer mediated communication. Rather the focus is on the online environment per se, and the issues that arise for learners with regards to silence. Second, by focusing on women learners and the feminist approach to silence and voice it is not the intention here to discuss in depth how feminist educationists analyse online silence. The aim is to present another way of understanding

online silence which could enrich future discussions as well as educational designs.

**Social cognitive theory of Learning - an overall view**

"Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action" (Bandura, 1977, p. 22 quoted in Kearsley, 1994c). This quote captures the essence of Bandura's learning theory, which he refers to as a social cognitive learning theory.

Unlike other theories, the social cognitive theory describes the factors essential to attain superior performance in any discipline and not the forms of thinking and behaviour that represent complex learning (Gredler, 2005). Although most theories associate learning with performance either by equating the two or seeing the latter as an indicator of the former, this theory does not. Bandura regards learning and performance as two separate events. This is an important point which differentiates this theory from other theories of learning. He believes that "individuals acquire internal codes of behavior that may or may not be performed." Therefore, learning is defined as "the acquisition of symbolic representations in the form of verbal or visual codes that serve as guidelines for future behavior." (Ibid, p. 344)

Bandura's learning theory is premised on "the power of example" (Stangls, 1998, p. 1). In other words, we can learn new behaviours and information by observing other people. Hence vicarious experiences seen as "the typical way human beings change" (Ibid, p. 2). This theory "added a social element, arguing that people can learn new information and behaviors by watching other people" (Van

Wagner, n.d., p. 1). Thus observational learning has been used as an argument against strict behaviourism which sees behaviour change an indication of learning. Bandura noted that "social imitation may hasten or short-cut the acquisition of new behaviors without the necessity of reinforcing successive approximations as suggested by Skinner (1953)" (Bandura et al, 1961).

Furthermore, social cognitive learning theory explains human behaviour in terms of "continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences" (Kearsley, 1994c, p. 1). In this sense, the human functioning is the result of a dynamic interplay of these influences. Bandura explains that "a three-way interlocking relationship, referred to as **reciprocal determinism**, exists among these three factors" (Gredler, 2005, p. 344). For him, the either/or relationship between the individual and the environment in relation to learning does not account for complex behaviors, nor does a simple bidirectional relationship between the individual and the environment. The mechanistic view of people responding to external stimuli is refuted. Instead, he sees people's reactions to stimuli as self-activated and initiated by them. This is an agentic perspective where people are viewed as self-regulatory and self-reflective beings and not just reactive ones to environmental influences. (Pajares, 2004).

In this dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences, or what is referred to as the '**triadic reciprocal causation**' (Bandura, 2001, p. 14), people are seen as producers as well as products of their environment. People are also seen as proactive rather than as merely reactive to inner cognitive-affective forces. "Personal agency and social structure operate interdependently. The three-way interlocking relationship



between behaviour, environment and personal factors contributes to the development of the individual's self-regulatory system which is an important factor in achieving complex capabilities. "Self-regulation is cyclical because feedback on prior performance provides information for current adjustments in one's efforts" (Gredler, 2005, p. 360).

Bandura expanded the conception of human agency to include collective agency. A social cognitive perspective distinguishes among three different modes of human agency. Beside personal agency mentioned above, there is proxy agency, and collective agency. When people do not have direct control over the social conditions and institutional practices that affect their daily lives they achieve their well being and outcomes through the exercise of proxy agency. People do not live their lives in isolation. People live and work together on shared beliefs, and many of the things they seek they can only achieve through socially interdependent effort. "Hence, they have to work in coordination with others to secure what they cannot accomplish on their own....People's shared belief in their collective power to produce desired results is a key ingredient of collective agency" (Ibid, p. 13-14).

The cognitive, vicarious, self-regulatory and self-reflective processes play a central role in human adaptation and change (Pajares, 2004). The component processes responsible for learning and performance are attention, retention, motor production, and motivational processes. Not all observed behaviors are effectively learned. In order to learn and acquire new behaviours one has to attend to and accurately perceive these behaviours (Gredler, 2005). Characteristics involving the model, the behavior, and the observer influence the learner's attention processes. Anything that detracts attention is going to have a negative effect on observational learning (Van Wagner, n.d.).

Retention processes are those processes that are responsible for "the symbolic coding of the behavior and the storage of the visual or verbal codes in memory" (Gredler, 2005, p. 353). Whether in the form of a mental image or verbal description, the ability to pull up information and act on it is vital for observational learning. These codes are important because they help the learner remember the observed behavior in the absence of the model. Rehearsal is an important retention process. Symbolic (mental) rehearsal and motor rehearsal serve as memory aids (Ibid). The former acts as a 'mental role-playing' (Stangls, 1998), and entails learners imagining themselves enacting the behaviour. The latter entails overt action. By mentally rehearsing and internally representing the behaviour motor rehearsing can then be guided (Gredler, 2005).

This **symbolizing capacity of humans** sets them apart from the limited stimulus-response of the animal world (Stangls, 1998). "By drawing on their symbolic capabilities, people can comprehend their environment, construct guides for action, solve problems cognitively, support forethoughtful courses of action, gain new knowledge by reflective thought, and communicate with others at any distance in time and space. By symbolizing their experiences, people give structure, meaning, and continuity to their lives" (Pajares, 2004, p. 8). Hence people are "agents of experiences rather than simply under goers of experiences" (Bandura, 2001, p. 4).

The motor reproduction processes include "the selection and organization of responses at the cognitive level, followed by their execution" (Gredler, 2005, p. 354). The images and descriptions are translated into actual behaviour (Boeree, 2006). So the motor reproduction processes entail performance of the acquired behaviour. Yet unless

individuals are motivated to perform they will not demonstrate what they have learned (Ibid.). Direct external reinforcement, vicarious reinforcement, and self-reinforcement function in observational learning as motivators (Gredler, 2005).

**Understanding online silence in a different way**

In his agentic model Bandura views humans as having the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of their lives. Human agency operates through consciousness and within a network of sociostructural influences. Human functioning is rooted in social systems. Therefore it seems useful to begin with Bandura's 'triadic reciprocal causation' and unfold the discussion thereafter. In this model, personal factors, behavioural patterns, and environmental influences all operate and influence one another bidirectionally.

Applying Bandura's triadic reciprocal causation model to explain online communication invites us to consider the personal, the behaviour, and the online environment and how they influence one another bidirectionally in a dynamic interplay. In this sense individuals communicating online belong to a social structure (system) with authorized rules which impose constraints and provide enabling resources for development. Also the online social structure is influenced and shaped by how individuals interact dynamically; generatively, proactively and reactively. As such, online participants are agents in their own right. This means that individuals' (women's) behaviour (silence) cannot be understood simply as a reaction to environmental stimuli or merely as the loss of voice. People/women do not respond to stimuli in a mechanistic way as in a cause and effect Skinnerian fashion. They initiate their reactions; they are self-activated. Therefore their agency should be allowed to emerge in researchers' interpretations.

There are a number of research studies which allow the emergence of human agency within online communication. Some of them papers address the learning behaviours of students participating in online courses. But little has been said about online silence and whether or not students are still learning when they are silent. Kalman's (2004) literature survey on the meaning of silence offers a number of definitions. He states that "the nomenclature of silence is so extensive and diverse that it is impossible to fit "online silence" into one clear category" (p. 11). He also considers 'lurking' as a special form of online silence and a manifestation of silence in a group situation. Lurkers are individuals who read and do not respond; they are "people who never take active part in the discussion" (Ibid, p. 28). Nonnecke and Preece (2000) admit that lurkers make up the majority of members in online groups, up to over 90% of online communities, yet little is known about them. An accepted definition of online lurkers is "anyone who reads but seldom if ever publicly contributes to an online group." (p. 110). Researchers such as Kollok and Smith (1996) describe lurkers as 'free riders'; they are non-contributors and resource taking members. Kalman (2004) explains that lurking is a special form of social cognition in groups. He adds that "Participation in online groups, such as forum discussions, is not symmetric" (p. 21).

The study carried out by Nonnecke and Preece (2000) sheds light on online silence, or what is referred to as lurking, from the lurker's perspective. The researchers' goal was to understand why lurkers lurked and what they did. To accomplish that, they interviewed 10 online group members from an open online discussion list. These interviews revealed 117 possible reasons for lurking, 5 primary lurking activities, and a number of key lurking strategies. The researchers found that a number of the participants had a

good understating of why and how they participated. Lurking, to them, was a "strategic and idiosyncratic activity driven by an individual's needs and background" (p. 115). Lurking was a conscious act to these participants that fulfilled certain goals. For some participants lurking satisfied certain needs such as entertainment, curiosity and learning, and developing a sense of community. While for others lurking was a strategy they applied to learn about the group and evaluate its value. Some participants used lurking in response to group dynamics or as a tool to enable them leave the group. Lurkers explained that they lurked as a result of their private lives and work responsibilities which imposed certain constraints upon them and denied them visibility.

Researchers of the above study, also reported that lurker participants spent their time managing their messages and to them this was a very important activity. In essence they found lurkers to be participants and their activities not to be passive. They were actively involved in employing strategies determining what to read, delete, or save. These activities, and others mentioned by the researchers, were goal driven. Therefore we can say that lurkers are participants who have goals and fulfill their aims consciously through lurking. They also found that one of the reasons for lurking was to maintain privacy and safety. To lurker participants posting meant the loss of privacy. Their safety was also a concern for them. Yet much of the writing which celebrates the advantages of online communication, as for example in its asynchronous form, plays down issues such as privacy and safety. The idea of the exposure of dialogue means that dialogue becomes an object for everybody else to look at, read and reflect upon. This exposure in itself could be silencing.

Participants in the study also felt a sense of a community while lurking. This was obvious from the activities they carried out while lurking. They showed effort to understand the community through careful reading of messages and side-posting to the members. This highlights an important point and that is being part of a community is not restricted to active posters. These silent participants were not totally silent. They observed that posting a question was easier than responding to one, and they did just that. Hence Nonnecke and Preece suggest that "a member of a group may lurk as a respondent and post as a questioner" (p. 121). On the same point, Roper (2007) reports that the students who participated in his study all agreed on the importance of asking thoughtful questions. This was a technique they used to engage both their peers and tutor. Although 26.3 percent of the students only asked questions, they did not refer to themselves as silent and nor did the researcher.

Pertinently, in her paper, Gulati (2004) examines the underlying assumptions of the emerging online strategies and learning pedagogy that place emphasis on participation in online collaborations. She argues that the emerging online practices focus on visible and measurable behaviours. As such they are under the influence of traditional normative practices. Gulati explains that collaborative online practices and environments are characterized by 'information giving' where the teacher is responsible for identifying, structuring, and preparing text and website links for the learners. A defined course outline and syllabi, requirements for participation and assignments are built on the assumption that "pre-defined learning structure and schedule suit all learners" and that collaboration is learner-centered (p. 4). As a result other forms of (radical/silent) participation are denied, and while

participation behaviour is rewarded, silence is punished (Ibid).

In fact the requirement of 'forced' visible participation could be silencing in different ways. For example, in a study on vicarious learning, the researchers found that when they made participation compulsory in the restructuring of their module; the changes were not successful in enhancing the effectiveness of the students' discussions. In fact, all students participated but restricted their questions to a more "shallow 'text-based' level" (Mayes, et al, 2002, p. 217). In another research which focused on asynchronous discussion in support of medical education, the researchers, Oliver and Shaw (2003), found out that students performed to criteria, and that most contributions were assignment focused but did not lead to worthwhile dialogue. Their content analysis revealed that participants were simply 'playing the game' of assessment (p. 56).

Beaudoin (2002 & 2005) is one of a few educators who addressed silence and online learning. In his course (2002), he noticed that 24 out of the 55 students, on an online master's degree programme, failed to post messages in one or two modules although participation was a requirement in the programme. A survey questionnaire was designed and was transmitted electronically to all 24 students in order to determine the factors that influenced their non-participation. His findings challenge assumptions regarding the inferiority of silence in online environments. Students spent most of their time reading assignments, reading other participants' comments, searching the web, writing assignments required for the course, doing other activities, and the least amount of time was spent on composing comments for online discussion. Furthermore, almost all respondents indicated that they were processing the ideas gained from the course even when they were not visibly participating. More than

half of the students indicated that they were learning just as much or more from reading others' postings than from writing their own comments. Half of the students identified themselves as 'autonomous learners' who did not prefer to be active in-group learning. Some students revealed that they gained more from the course activities than from the online discussions. Silent students explained that their discomfort with the electronic environment was a reason for their low level participation. Students also wanted to "get it right" before going "public".

Having analysed the final course grades, Beaudoin asserts that "performance cannot be easily correlated to participation or that frequent participation necessarily leads to better performance on graded assignments" (p. 150). He alerts us that "What is not seen in asynchronous environments, literally and figuratively, is what else is going on that contributes to participants' learning" (p. 151). He concludes urging faculty members to reevaluate their online collaborative strategies which "force interaction", and their view of the parasitic silent student. Beaudoin also asserts that "This prevailing perception that acceptable academic performance is premised largely on visible content, designates the less visible processes of teaching and learning that occur "off camera"." (p. 153)

What does this tell us? Invisible participation is real; it is part of students' experiences and learning. As such it should be valued and utilised for the benefit of the students not only the silent ones but also the non-silent. Beaudoin's advice here is to the point in reminding educators who are involved in the instruction and assessment of online learning that

although the medium is technology-based, the actual learning remains an inherently auto-didactic and invisible process, just as it is in



courses at fixed times and places. It is also important that faculty...recognize that another "invisible" activity....may also be taking place, and this too, in turn, can be fed back into the course, so that learning continues to occur through knowledge acquisition, application, and reflection. These learning behaviours are all occurring outside the context of the visible online course environment. (Beaudoin, 2001, p. 151)

**Conclusion: the eloquence of silence**

Bandura's social cognitive learning theory 'liberates' feminist pedagogy from the 'paradoxical' entrapment it had created for women learners, in a number of ways. The two most important points are: the separation between learning and performance, and the agentic view of women learners. Women students no longer need to visibly participate online to prove learning. In fact they learn just as effectively as visible participants as they remain invisible. "Indeed, for some learners participation in informal learning through lurking and other invisible activities may be deeper and more engaging, than formal [visible] online provisions" (Gulati, 2004, p. 8).

From a social cognitive learning perspective, women students are learning by the mere act of observing online activities and reading other learners' online postings. Performance is not considered an indicator of learning. Hence women students are learning while silently observing. In the same time the agentic view of women learners make the learning event real and a worth-while experience. A dynamic interplay of personal, behavioural, and environmental influences produces women functioning. In other words women are producers as well as products of their environments. Women learners do not then just react to the learning environment and other learners. They also

influence and act upon their learning environment and their actions affect other learners. In accordance then *online silence and invisible participation cannot and should not be seen as a reactive response to influences per se, or the absence of visible participation, but as a human functioning by choice and as a result of the dynamic interplay in the learning environment.* Online silence has specific meanings which must be read within its learning context.

As such online silence is an act of intention and will; a choice on behalf of women learners. Feminists, and others, in my view, need to investigate the agentic dynamics that is evolving in online environments and how silence and non-participation is used by women students to fulfill their interests and what forms of act silence represents. “We must be willing to learn from those who don’t speak up in words. What are their silences telling us?” (Lather, 1987a, quoted in Orner, 1992). Feminists need to challenge the concept of voice as it is being constructed in their arguments and their insistence on a 'speaking' subject.

A greater understanding of invisible learning within the online learning context and the issues enacted is required. This may help feminist pedagogues see the importance of the silent learning experience. Gulati (2004) captures this as such:

Joining up of formal pedagogy with informal [invisible] learning could allow for more diverse learning opportunities that do not rely on [visible] outcome and only what is seen, but instill in the learner the ability to construe and critically understand the world around them.(p. 11)

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