Navigating Silence as Agency, Oppression, and Empowerment in Student Affairs

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#NavigatingSilence
Learning Outcomes

• Explore the multiple ways in which silence is utilized in higher education and student affairs professional and educational settings
• Contend with the different ways in which identities influence the use and need for silence and how silence can be a source of empowerment for individuals with minoritized identities
• Explore the beneficial ways in which student affairs and higher education professionals can utilize silence in their careers and practice
• Develop a more intentional and reflexive understanding of the multiple ways in which silence is present in participants’ lives and careers
Warm-Up

How do you feel about silence in your professional practice or your teaching?

What thoughts, feelings, reactions does silence evoke for you?
Review of Scholarship
“Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were kept “submerged” in a situation in which such critical awareness and response were practically impossible” (Freire, 2000, p. 30).

“Oppression...[often] is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules” (Young, 2009, p. 56).
Agency and Voice

Silence “is a site not only of resistance but also of transformation, the home where new dreams and visions are born” (Lorde, 1984, p.20)

Silence as Empowerment (Parpart, 2010; Fivush, 2010) takes issue with the notion of *silence* as a source of disempowerment

– Problematizes silence as a form of empowerment
  • “Politics of Silence” as a strategy for dealing with racist and homophobic environments

– Differentiates between *being silenced* and *being silent*
  • Argues “silence and secrecy as legitimate and even empowering strategies for dealing with difficult situations” (Fivush, 2009).

– Challenges notions of *voice* as only the form of finding agency and empowerment (Parpart, 2010)

Being silent can be a form of *power*; by remaining silent, marginalized groups need not explain or justify their existence.
“Dehumanization, which afflicts both those whose humanity has been stolen and those who have stolen it, distorts the process of becoming more fully human” (Freire, 2000, p. 28)

Culturally Informed Silence (Osajima, 2007) illustrates how societal structures and oppression conveys messaging of culturally informed silence

- Problematizes internalize oppression as the reason marginalized groups remain silent.
  - Limits the ability of the marginalized to think and reflect.
  - Oppressed groups blame themselves for their own oppression, not in the relations within society.
  - Internalize oppression tells marginalized groups to remain silent in order to be safe.
  - Being quiet, conforming, and invisible is a good way to avoid being the target of racism.
“Communal silence in class, due to concentration and absorption, was seen as a positive indication of comfort and security” (Ollin, 2008)

• Silence often seen as a negative in learning spaces
  – As a result, we feel the need to fill the space
  – We also award non-silence

• Silence, however, is a space for learning, contemplation and growth
  – “Silence might be simultaneously generative and suppressive, speaking and silent, fruitful and harmful” (Baurain, 2011, p. 99)
  – Silence is the space between comfort (having something to say) and “no longer” or “not yet,” exploring internally what might be said (Hamelock & Friesen, 2012)

“Silence in classrooms offers the potential for more democratic forms of interaction. To use it, students must accept the need to remain silent for their own sake or for the sake of others. Over time, this can lead to a sense of teaching-based group intimacy that, ultimately, can enhance the discovery of knowledge.” (Lees, 2013)
Strategic Silence

- Self preservation
- Situational Silence
- Strategic Silence
- Identity Negotiation & Management
- Strategic Voice
- Masking

Reinert, 2016
Discussion
“... silence...respects understanding...
silence gives that sense to all there is...
Silence is so windowful.”

Gertrude Stein, Geography and Plays
(As cited in Dalke, 1995)
Reflection Question

How can silence be of benefit in your own professional and/or pedagogical practice?
Reflection Question

What are your own “growth edges” with regard to silence?

What might be your students’ “growth edges”?
Reflection Question

How can we work to increase beneficial silence while eliminating oppressive silence (silencing)?
Thank you!

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