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[Next: New Voices](#)

SILENCED BY RELIGION:

REFLECTIONS ON SITUATIONS FROM COLLEGE ENGLISH

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The social constructivist and cultural studies bent of so many writing and rhetoric classes emphasizes inclusivity, encouraging our students to share their ideas and to broaden their understanding of a range of cultural concerns. Most often, the students we strive to include are those from ethnic subcultures that have been historically marginalized, and our work as instructors assists in the creation of more progressive learning experiences. "Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community," argues bell hooks (8). What happens, however, when the population that is in need of voice is one that sometimes resists our diverse, inclusive tendencies?

About 50% of the student population at the public university where I work are members of the same religion—a specific Christian denomination. Many students from this particular religious group who attend our university often assume that instructors and other students might have a negative response to their particular religious beliefs, due mainly to their understanding (or misunderstanding) of academic expectations. Conscious of the marginalization of their beliefs in the larger academic world, these students usually refrain from making comments in class that would indicate their particular religious orientation. In her discussion of group identities in writing groups, Teresa Bruckner points out, "Students or newcomers to professional practices are entering writing situations where identities are already set and into which they must fit themselves, and negotiating group identity may be difficult or unavailable. Fitting in can be a lengthy and frustrating task" (Bruckner). Working to develop a serious academic identity is difficult for all students, but when students with strong religious identities work to alter their public identity for the college classroom, the process of identity formation becomes particularly challenging.

What challenges instructors, though, is working with students whose identities are in flux, who are learning how much to share about themselves and how much to hold back. In encouraging our students to share their personal experiences, including religious ones, in classroom contexts—through discussion and writing—it seems we are potentially achieving the free and open participation of each student and the validation of each student's experience and beliefs, though at the same time placing students in moments of potential conflict or discomfort. In this article, I discuss the effects of this conflict on our students, both those who subscribe to a common religion and those who do not, and on their work in class, and I will address the challenges of developing an effective inclusive classroom within such an academic environment. Though some of the circumstances I share in this article may be specific to my university, the issues they raise are relevant to any academic institution located where a large part of the population belongs to a common religious organization.

Situation One

During my first semester teaching at my current university, I taught a freshman composition course. One of several assignments asked students to write about how a particular piece or type of writing affected the development of their literacy. One LDS student—let's call her Anne—asked me if she could write about the effect of the Book of Mormon. I told her that she was welcome to use that text, but reminded her to keep focused on the assignment requirements. This student, losing sight of the purpose of the essay—a literacy narrative—wrote about her faith and her beliefs, not about literacy. Because I was unfamiliar with the beliefs of her faith, I made some embarrassingly silly comments. For example, when she first mentioned Moroni, I asked her to provide a complete name the first time she mentions a person in a formal essay, not realizing that Moroni (not Mr. Moroni) is an angel who has no other name. At semester's end, in her final reflective essay, it was clear that Anne had felt betrayed, that she believed that her religion had received a low grade, and that once again, public education was failing her.

To some degree, Anne's situation is the most common one. Her religious status was never mentioned during class, only in her writing. So in addition to me, only members of a peer response group would have seen her paper. In Anne's case, she avoided class on the critique day, preferring to keep her ideas private. Thus, I was the only reader, and I was an uneducated one.

Many students avoid declaring themselves as belonging to a specific religion in a classroom space, leaving their beliefs for private conversations or written work. While this may not seem strange, at my university the silence transcends comments about just religion. LDS students often remain quiet regarding any issue about which the church has definite and powerful laws. Seldom do these students comment on sexuality or gender-related issues; comments about death and the afterlife are also scarce, as are discussions about abortion, the death penalty, and other issues that cross the political-social realm. Cheryl Glenn says of silence that it "can be something one does, something that is done to

someone, or something one experiences. However it takes shape, the form of silence (the delivery) is always the same, but the function of specific acts, states, phenomena of silence—that is, its interpretation by and effect upon other people—varies according to the social-rhetorical context in which it occurs” (9). Glenn’s articulation of the functions of silence indicates the difficulty that teachers often have in determining what to do about silence in a classroom. With such a range of possible causes, silence may not always be something to “solve”—it may at times be something to “listen” to.

Though not completely possible to determine, the causes of Anne’s silence may be protectiveness towards her faith and/or for her ideas. The problem with this silence, whatever its cause, is no doubt obvious to every instructor. Without a full class of students willing to offer opinions and engage in debate, there is very little opportunity for students to develop stronger reasoning skills, clearer thinking, or an advanced sense of responsibility for their own ideas. For most of us, a major goal is to work with a fully engaged group of students, even when the students may find themselves uncomfortable, their ideas challenged. hooks explains that “there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches” (43). Pat Belanoff comments on this pain when she explains that “reflection often grows out of discomfort even though it may afford delight and thrive in mystery and paradox. Educational settings have to create some level of dis-ease, some disruption of student and teacher expectations: ways to disrupt our students’ routines and cause them some discomfort, which is undoubtedly going to cause us discomfort also” (420). Indeed, students like Anne are likely to continue feeling awkward or rejected when their ideas are not accepted at face value. As instructors, we can do what we expect our students to do—explain the goals of critical thinking, of challenging their ideas—so that our students not only perform these activities as exercises but also learn how to bring them into their academic lives, and sometimes even their personal lives.

Situation Two

In a junior-level course, Writing about Literature, students came to class one day to work in peer groups, offering each other critique on annotated bibliographies they were completing. One group consisted of four students: Barbara, a liberal, single student; Cathy, religious, married at 18, fairly conservative; Dave, religious and of the same faith as Cathy, a Marine, married with two children, and very conservative in his views; and Eric, unknown religion, liberal, and gay. The bibliographies focused on specialized areas of literary studies: Romantic literature, Shakespeare studies, contemporary British poetry, etc. Eric passed out copies of his bibliography: his area of focus was queer studies. While the students worked, I kept an eye on this group, concerned about the responses Eric would get. When Dave mentioned that he didn’t know what the acronym GLBT meant, Eric clarified the term, and Dave simply suggested that he might include the full term in the introduction for clarification purposes. The group conversation continued as the students offered a number of useful suggestions about Eric’s and the other students’ work.

Initially, I was quite pleased that Eric’s work was received with the same respect and attention as that of every other member of the group. It was important to me that Eric not feel uncomfortable about sharing his area of interest. Furthermore, until this class, Eric had offered no hint to the students in the class that he might be gay; like many of the students, he kept much about his personal identity and attitudes to himself. Seeing that Eric would be treated respectfully, regardless of other students’ ideas about sexual orientation, calmed me down.

Yet after class, I could not shake the feeling that something was wrong. Although the students stayed on track and made writing the issue of the day, other issues went undiscussed. No one asked Eric why he was interested in the field of queer studies, no one ventured near any personal issue with regard to his choice of topic. Instead, they remained neutral. Yes, this approach allows for a calm learning environment, but is serenity always the most useful approach? Although Peter Elbow’s advocacy of listening is sometimes misconstrued as a passive approach, he in fact supports genuine discussion and debate: “Disagreement doesn’t have to lead to fighting or an adversarial process if we cooperate in exploring divergent views” (393). What would have happened if Dave had told Eric that his subject seemed strange, that he couldn’t understand the value of gender studies? What if Eric had been pressed to articulate why the field of queer studies not only mattered to him intellectually, but personally as well? Perhaps a genuine dialogue might have offered this entire group of students the opportunity not only to voice their own opinions, but a chance to broaden their understanding of other belief systems.

While these ponderings shed light on the undeveloped possibilities of this small group discussion, they are only, of course, hypothetical, since it is just as possible that Dave would be completely at ease with Eric’s sexual orientation, that he might also be interested in gender studies, that his ideas do not always adhere to church doctrine. It’s possible that Eric might learn to reevaluate his conservative, religious peers and their attitudes toward sexuality if he’d engaged in a more thorough conversation. “Making the classroom a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute is a central goal of transformative pedagogy,” bell hooks asserts (39). If one of our goals as educators is to help our students become more engaged participants in their communities, then this responsibility for communication should be an aspect of learning we encourage as a regular part of our classes.

Perhaps just as important, though, is the encouragement of attentive, open listening. Elbow argues that “we need safety just as much for listeners who are, after all, trying to learn to be more skilled at in-dwelling or believing. It’s *difficult* for most of us to enter into a view we want to quarrel with or feel threatened by; it’s safer for us to do so if we have permission simply not to talk about it any more for a while. Let the words we resist just sink in for a while with no comment” (396). I agree with Elbow that listening can allow students the chance to start to learn, to understand, without feeling frightened by an unknown set of values or beliefs. However, it becomes difficult to reach a point of listening when those around us are silent. Whose responsibility it becomes to create an opening for vocalizing unfamiliar positions is not clear. Among my students, should Eric have taken the risk and allowed others to listen? Should the others have broached the subject of queer studies with their take and given Eric the chance to listen? There is, of course, no way to answer these questions satisfactorily. At alternate times, our students need to be both speakers and listeners, need to be ready to enter the world through their own points of view and ready to see the world from another’s perspective.

What our students miss, what we miss, when students use silence as both speakers and listeners can be astonishing. When students break out of their controlled spaces and share personal feelings and experience, we all benefit. In her article “Enacting Faith,” Lizabeth A. Rand comments astutely that “Christian spirituality . . . seeks to take attention off one’s own self in order to exalt the name of Jesus. Paradoxically, this kind of obedient rhetorical stance is also considered to be transgressive of the established order and therefore reflects people’s ability to think and act for themselves” (363). The sometimes uncomfortable position of calling on conservative viewpoints and encouraging an open exchange with more liberal attitudes may serve our students much more beneficially than might be expected by the students themselves. The chance to engage in a genuine exchange of diverse ideas and experiences creates a truly ethical classroom. Tison Pugh argues, “In constructing a classroom sensitive to the ethical dimensions of

pedagogy and learning, the professor must inculcate respect for all students and for all student perspectives, while at the same time encouraging a rigorous critique of all ideas expressed" (574). Perhaps more significantly (and more difficultly), we must create an atmosphere of respect *among* our students for each other's beliefs and lives. Typically, this must start at the level of ideas, of finding common ground and locating differences.

Situation Three

In a freshman writing class, students were discussing essays focused on medical ethics in preparation for an upcoming essay. Helen, 20 years old, conservatively religious, and married, told the class about the decision she and her husband had made to seek out in vitro fertilization since they had not had any luck getting pregnant. After discussing the reasons for their decision, she told us that the local leader of her church had met with her and her husband and had forbade them from using this "non-natural" approach to pregnancy. She proudly told the class that she and her husband had ignored his directive and had recently started the procedure. Questions followed, all from students who were not members of her church; the students who were members, always chatty with Helen before and after class, remained silent.

My initial happiness in seeing a student feel safe enough to share personal experience and opinion dissipated as the conversation, once again, did not include half of the students. These students, I would think, would have a great deal to contribute to discussion, in part because they share a common religious and social perspective and would have a good sense of the context for Helen's situation. These same students who discuss the events taking place at their local churches and social events silenced themselves.

I was impressed with Helen and her willingness not only to counter authority, but to describe her experience in a class full of both strangers and church friends. Regardless of the silence of the other members of her church, Helen was still bravely entering the world of serious debate and discussion. What took me longer to recognize, however, was that Helen's resistance to power, her decision to make a choice in contrast to the formal word of a man with church authority, was also an acquiescence to power. Her adherence to the demands of her church to have children took precedence for Helen over the demands of a single religious authority. She managed to be both a rebel and a true believer at once.

Nonetheless, she entered the conversation in a much more committed way than most of the other students in the class. She performed in the way that Christyne Berzsenyi wants her students to act, with a "re-examination of the social forces in their lives that shape identity conceptions, interrelations, and discourse" (Berzsenyi). This student explored some of the impact that her church (not just her faith) had on her, enabling her to move beyond simple, unchallenged acceptance. Through this process, she also allowed herself to enter a dialogue with other students, who might have been encouraged to think more fully about their own identities and expectations.

As I watched the discussion among members of the class, I noticed that there were two dialogues going on at once. The first was oral—the comments and questions that led to debate on the ethics of in vitro fertilization (as well as the ethics of religious leaders trying to control our personal lives). The second was unspoken—most of the students from Helen's church watched and listened, but kept their responses silent until in an environment that seemed safer to them. Trish Roberts-Miller points out that "it is naïve to think that students negotiate as equals with communities of discourse or even that students have equal power when negotiating with one another" (555). Again, as a result of silence—and power distribution—the majority of students lost out. Some assumptions were never challenged (such as the right or obligation to disagree with our leaders), and some opinions, particularly more conservative ones, were given little voice. Gregory Clark argues the following:

From a social constructionist perspective, then, we communicate with others who share similar experiences for the purpose of coming to a common understanding of our circumstances, an understanding that not only binds us together as a cooperating community but also provides a foundation for our continued communication. . . . From this perspective, communication is an ongoing social interaction through which we collaborate with others in the continuous process of reconstructing the common interpretation of the world that enables us to live and act together. (4)

Clark's position represents the most positive, optimistic attitude toward the development of discourse communities. His affirmation of the togetherness of participants, however, seems to overlook the fact that often our students are parts of multiple and often conflicting communities. While they might all be members of a class and share certain college-level goals—like the development of critical thinking and a desire to learn—they are all simultaneously members of other communities whose ideologies and expectations often conflict with those of the college community. Glenn is right to remind us that "silence continues to be, too often, read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power and has, in fact, transformed the rhetorical situation itself" (155). In my classroom, much of the silence was likely produced as a rhetorical objection to Helen's position. We cannot, however, know for sure, which is why even rhetorically motivated silence can be counterproductive to understanding and intellectual development.

Clark's hope for a common understanding is one I believe we should continue to strive for, but the silences in the classrooms suggest that we aren't quite there yet, that the foundation is not yet established, that collaboration and communication do not always produce shared understanding. Among my students, the conflicting values often result in silence, most often for the religiously conservative students. Where these students are more likely to offer opinion and enter discussion more easily are in more practical areas, less political or theoretical areas.

Situation Four

Each time that I teach junior-level Business Communication, I focus a segment of the course on the job application process. As part of this unit, we review a handful of sample resumes, both successful and unsuccessful. On one of these samples is included a line about prior missionary work. Inevitably, we spend half of a class period discussing the appropriateness of including missionary work on a resume, how to include it, the advantages and disadvantages of including it, and why one might choose to omit such information. During these discussions, it is always the students with missionary experience who are most involved while other students keep their opinions to themselves.

What makes resumes the acceptable place to acknowledge one's religion? Why do the same students who refuse to offer opinions or challenge other students regarding in vitro fertilization and sexual orientation feel at home giving

details of their own missions: "I only went to Kansas City," one tells us, while another spent two years in Japan.

Certainly, none of these students is coming into dispute about morality in our resume discussion. The focus is on practical concerns: How will a prospective employer look at church service? How will a non-religious reader respond to the resume of someone known to be Mormon? In a way, very little is risked in our discussions. Yes, their religious affiliation is known, but the fact that someone is LDS in the inter-mountain West comes as no surprise. And the discussion allows for much more certainty when these same people apply for their first post-college position.

Ironically, it is during these conversations that the non-religious students often remain quiet. Instead of imagining themselves as prospective employers reading about another's religious experience, they pull back and watch the discussion from a distance. When given a chance to challenge their peers to consider why one would want to include personal information on a business document, or why one would choose to leave school to go on a mission, these students stay to themselves. In a conversation with bell hooks, Ron Scapp explains, "So one of the responsibilities of the teacher is to help create an environment where students learn that, in addition to speaking, it is important to listen respectfully to others. This doesn't mean we listen uncritically or that classrooms can be open so that anything someone else says is taken as true, but it means really taking seriously what someone says" (hooks 150). The trick, of course, is convincing our students that listening makes a difference, both for the students who are testing out ideas, as well as for themselves as listeners. By paying attention to other voices, other opinions, we find our own thoughts being challenged and are better able to take active part in the formation of our identities. Listening actively and demonstrating our respect by communicating our responses become necessary if we are to create a truly effective learning environment.

What happens in each of these four classroom situations is that opportunities for discussion to reach beyond the safety of neutrality are bypassed. The perceived divide between students who share a religious faith and those who do not continues unabated. Given many chances to genuinely engage in debate about important ideas and aspects of their lives, the separations among our students often seem too large to obliterate.

A survey that concerned the perceptions regarding LDS students at our university was conducted in 2003 by a graduate student in the Sociology Department. Among the findings was this: "Non-LDS students . . . are more likely to feel discriminated against" (low grading, criticism of ideas, etc.) for religious reasons (i.e., not being Mormon) than Mormon students do (Meeker 62). Our non-LDS students thought that the LDS students were favored by faculty and their ideas given more credibility. Whether their perceptions are true or faulty, the perceptions these students have serve to reinforce this divide among students. If silence is used by many of our students, what can be done to bridge the gaps among students? How can we create a thriving community space in a classroom?

It would be quixotic of me to act as if I had found a solid, clear solution, especially given that such a pronouncement would assume a single, monolithic identity for students who share a religious faith, as well as for other students. Experience has shown that, while the types of silence observed in my classes may appear frequently, each occurrence results from different causes. Jane Danielewicz states that teaching

demands that teachers analyze the situation, consider the variables of students, texts, knowledge, abilities, and goals to formulate an approach to teaching, and then to carry it out—every day, minute to minute, within the ever-shifting context of the classroom. It requires having empathy for students, a knowledge of one's field, a sense of how learning occurs, the ability to generate a practice out of an idea, and the power to evaluate instantaneously whether it's going well or needs adjusting. (9)

The empathy and quick evaluative skills that Danielewicz observes form the core of helpful response. Students who feel somewhat threatened, nervous, uncomfortable, are not likely to respond to pressure, even subtle pressure, to talk. By developing an ability to recognize in our students the potential causes for silence, instructors might better understand the students and their needs, allowing us an opening into change.

In a discussion of rhetoric education, Thomas J. Darwin points out, "At the heart of rhetorical intelligence is the ability to cultivate and draw from our relationships with others as we face . . . situations. And because our relationships are grounded in our emotional engagement with our situations and each other, understanding pathos is essential to understanding rhetoric" (23). Locating paths to emotional or psychic connections with and among our students seems likely to produce stronger, more effective rhetorical intelligence. Although we often teach audience analysis in writing classes, these lessons focus on ways that writers can find links to potential readers. Can we help our students become more rhetorically sophisticated—and more compassionate—by helping them to learn to *read* so as to find links to the writers? Perhaps placing additional emphasis on the responsibilities of readers might allow for writers to relax their control a bit and be open to sharing more of their genuine thoughts, unhindered by the anxiety produced by their attention to audience expectations. For example, in a writing workshop, we might ask readers to construct sets of questions about both rhetorical strategies and content, to develop lines of inquiry into the origins of the subject matter and the writers' interests in it. By formally valuing inquisitiveness in readers, we can encourage writers to break at least some of their religious-based silence.

The presence of silence, of course, seems to engulf both readers and writers, both listeners and speakers. Edward J. Ingebreten comments that "all private lives have moments of forced public interpellation when, by the dictates of 'politeness,' of legal or religious constraints, or through other established mechanisms, private or personal experience is rendered unspeakable. Silence is a powerful, purposeful weapon" (20). Who commands the weapon and who is controlled by it, however, are not always distinguishable in situations related to religious-based issues. Why our students remain silent is perhaps what is most uncertain. Fear of embarrassment or ridicule, concern about insulting others, and simple desire for privacy are all likely to contribute from time to time to silence. But to achieve an open-ended learning environment demands that students find a way out of this silence.

When teaching at another major public university more than ten years ago, I found my typically enthusiastic, engaged students in a freshman writing course to be very quiet one day. We were beginning a unit on race and ethnicity for their next essay. I began class by asking students to discuss cultural and ethnic stereotypes. The responses came from a small number of students, who spoke very slowly and with great attention to language, being very careful of every word they used. This "discussion" seemed so safe, so filled with unspoken ideas, that no true points of debate or argument appeared.

When we reconvened for the following class, I asked students to write about why discussion was so difficult in the previous class. This in-class writing produced some of the more thoughtful, challenging ideas of the semester. Students explained their silences with truly intimate details of their lives. Some white students indicated that the presence of a few students of color in class made them concerned that they would inadvertently insult the other

students. One Japanese-American student indicated resistance to what she perceived as the “nice,” liberal attitudes of the white students; she thought that their behavior was dishonest. So much was written when the audience was just me, but perhaps it is also significant that students felt safe to answer the “real” question—the question that focused on our class, on that week, on their personal reactions and feelings. They had permission to not be careful, to not worry about an audience. In so doing, genuine ideas came forward. As I read aloud a few passages from their responses (with their permission) and summarized some of the major issues that were raised, there was a perceptible sense of relief. Although the classroom discussion did not then become the battleground of the United Nations, the conversation was able to move beyond surface worries, and a bit more honesty prevailed and more voices were heard.

Such a strategy—asking our students to write about why they can’t speak, about why they use silence—may be a useful way into more thorough discussions. The opportunity to divorce oneself from the demands of audience, to create a form of “private” writing about the issue of silence, allows just enough of a step toward intimacy that students can dissolve some of the communication barriers.

When I mention intimacy, I am not, of course, suggesting a change to an emotion-centered classroom. I am hopeful, however, that when we provide a safe opening for our students, they can propel themselves into a discussion more willing to take risks. “Most situations that involve sustained interpersonal engagement generate their fair share of tensions and conflicts. . . . Disagreement, challenges, and competition can all be forms of participation” argues Etienne Wenger (77). The task at hand may simply consist of finding ways to get our students to trust that disagreement and debate are forms of *effective* participation, and that participation is a necessary element in developing a critical, self-reflective, and genuinely valuable classroom. Once we succeed in transforming even some silence into articulated opinion and response, we move a step closer to the development of a free-thinking, communal classroom.

Of course, even if we achieve in our classrooms a more honest and open approach to dialogue and debate, there is no guarantee that these experiences will transfer into the world beyond our classes. Whether our students take with them into the other discourse communities in which they participate the validation received from sharing and questioning and debating in our open classrooms is ultimately not under our control. But by drawing our students out of their caves of silence, they may find that their own self-perception begins to change. Wenger argues the following:

Identity is a locus of social selfhood and by the same token a locus of social power. On the one hand, it is the power to belong, to be a certain person, to claim a place with the legitimacy of membership; and on the other it is the vulnerability of belonging to, identifying with, and being part of some communities that contribute to defining who we are and thus have a hold on us. (207)

Our classrooms, by encouraging an inclusiveness of ideas, may help our students to become vulnerable, to open themselves to joining with students who hold different beliefs, rather than separating themselves off. And perhaps that inclusion may encourage these same students to use their new-found sense of belonging when they re-enter other communities. Although I like to imagine a revolutionary change coming about from the decrease of silenced voices, it seems more likely that we might find a slow evolutionary change. Our more conservative students are not likely to leave our class advocating liberal ideas, but by helping all our students to voice their ideas (and listen actively to others’ ideas), we may see signs of a shift to more inclusivity.

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Return to [Table of Contents](#)

[Next: New Voices: Enduring Basic Writing](#)