

Anna Johnson

Dr. Mary Glavan

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**A Moment of Silence is Worth a Thousand of Words:
Appreciating and Understanding Alternatives to Conventional Classroom Advocacy**

Introduction

The way that women are socialized to be submissive in greater society makes it difficult for them to be advocates in the classroom, especially when it involves disagreeing with their male classmates. This process of socialization that influences how women act begins in elementary school and is reinforced throughout the rest of one's academic career through the politics of teacher-student interactions. Research regarding gendered classroom advocacy suggests that there are complex dimensions to why women have trouble speaking up in the classroom, but also how the absence of speaking up can be considered powerful. Because women have been forced to work around social norms when being advocates, many women are accustomed to using the power of silence in order to take a stance or emphasize their opinion. However, because silence is viewed as a lack of engagement, it has a negative connotation in the classroom and is dismissed as a lack of participation by many instructors who overlook its significance. To best address the harm of gendered socialization that hinders the ability for female students to advocate in a conventional sense, I argue that teachers must commit to understanding how female students use silence rather than forcing traditional forms of classroom advocacy upon them. When teachers learn how to listen for deliberate silence, they will be able to foster female empowerment in the classroom.

Background

Evidently, boys and girls are treated differently and have different expectations in academic settings, which formulates the problem of women being left out of traditional advocacy. For the purpose of this paper, I define classroom advocacy to be students' ability to have distinct opinions and execute them in the classroom without being dismissed. In "How Gender Disparities Affect Classroom Learning," Kieran Chidi Nduagbo, who has a PhD in Educational Leadership, asserts that teachers treating boys and girls differently socially intrinsically affects academic learning. Specifically, she found that teachers discipline boys more severely than girls and provide them with more praise than they do girls, such as thanking them for a contribution to a difficult conversation. This positive reinforcement for boys makes them more confident when speaking up, while girls are more praised for physical appearance than the content they bring to the classroom (Nduagbo). Similarly, professors Lucy E. Bailey and Karen Graves explore the contradictions of education being the "great equalizer" by considering the constraint of women's development in the classroom in "Gender and Education." A 1998 study by K. Martin cited in the article similarly reveals that girls' voices and movements are often restricted in the classroom while boys were more readily given the opportunity to be expressive. For example, male students were given the space to shout and move freely while girls were not rewarded for such behavior (Bailey & Graves 697).

Further, Timothy Frawley shares more examples of the forms in which gendered socialization takes place in the academic sector in his essay "Gender in the Classroom." Frawley's work as a manuscript reviewer focuses specifically on gender differences, which makes his work regarding education very focused on gender biases. He asserts that boys are

called on by name more often and are asked more complex and abstract questions than girls are, which gives boys the room to be challenged intellectually and take up space in the classroom. On the contrary, girls then speak up less as they may feel as though they are interjecting or won't add anything valuable to the discussion. Frawley describes that boys are encouraged to be outspoken, competitive and autonomous in order to follow the norms of being dominant and macho (222). Since boys are granted more positive reinforcement to speak freely, they are more equipped to speak up in the classroom. This gendered socialization in the classroom begins in elementary school and will continue to have a great impact on female student submissiveness for the rest of their academic careers.

The missed opportunities of female students to contribute to academic discourse and challenge their male classmates in debates is unfavorable for everyone's intellectual development. Bailey and Graves in "Gender and Education" claim that an aspiration of educational institutions is to be "the great equalizer," which is hindered by the lack of instructors to appreciate and interpret female advocacy. Notably, not only female students are harmed by their voices being suppressed. Since boys are socialized to have a larger presence in classrooms and engage in constant verbal communication, this sometimes leads to them acting out and misbehaving in class. Frawley describes how this behavior has been linked to slipping academic performance as well as social statistics indicating that boys are more often labeled as being "socially disturbed" than girls are (223). For this reason, boys are also negatively affected by gendered socialization and therefore addressing the problem will also be beneficial for male students.

From Problem to Solution

Currently, the lack of verbal female advocacy is poorly addressed by instructors, if even addressed at all. In his discussion of the ways in which gender bias shapes education, Frawley asserts that instructors will often dismiss the exaggerated participation of male students as typical masculine behavior rather than realizing that over-sharing from men takes away from the opportunities of women. Specifically regarding teacher-student interactions, Frawley postulates that teachers further the norms of who gets to speak in the classroom through their own perceptions of gender differences (223). Clearly, this neglect of understanding further contributes to the inability of women to advocate in the classroom. I argue that teachers must take the lead on empowering women in the classroom by committing to interpret their non-traditional forms of advocacy as it is part of their responsibility as educators to empower women. Frawley similarly claims, "teaching requires an obligation to question deeply rooted sexist attitudes and a willingness to use a variety of teaching strategies" (226). Although children hopefully will learn to dismantle gender norms in other sectors of their life such as their household, it is still important that educators make it a priority to lead a classroom that benefits all students, not just male students.

For teachers to empower female students, they have to recognize alternative forms of advocacy that take in consideration how women have been oppressed in the classroom and therefore oppressed of conventional advocacy, or speaking up. The absence of female voices in the classroom should not be deemed as an absence of advocacy for female students who have faced barriers to conventional activism. In "Silence as Indicator of Engagement," Yolanda Majors and Evan Ortleib claim that silence should be recognized as a form of engagement rather than an absence of participation. While silence is generally seen as a negative response and a way of disengaging in the classroom, it could rather be recognized as a form of engagement,

specifically for female students. Majors and Ortlieb assert that talking is a form of culture, and silence can be viewed as an alternative to talking rather than the absence of it (90-91). Jonathan G. Silin, who wrote a research article titled “Speaking up for Silence,” describes silences as opportunities to “reflect upon troubling questions, acknowledge unresolved issues, and experience unsettling emotions” (42). In this way, silence is not always the absence of thoughts and can rather be a different way of expressing them. Silin pushes that communication occurs through silence, and teachers should attempt to comprehend the message that their students are giving them. Silin explains, “my students teach me that silence may be wielded aggressively like a weapon, manipulated carefully to ensure marginality, and constructed as a dam to hold back emotions” (43). With this description, Silin is explaining that he has learned to notice when his students are using silence strategically and how it can add to the conversation in often overlooked ways.

Students who do not speak up use their silence in profound ways to evoke certain emotions that may not be able to be portrayed through spoken words. For example, silence could be used to invalidate someone’s contribution to a discussion, or used to show that uplifting someone else’s voice is more important in that moment. This relates to female advocacy because oftentimes feminists want to speak out as they view their voice as their asset, but they are too burdened by the pressures of linguistic politeness and the fear of male pushback. While our voices are certainly important and should not be suppressed, women can also use silence to be advocates and express their thoughtful views in the classroom. Likewise, in “The Fullness of Silence in the Classroom,” Katherine Schultz emphasizes that teachers should consider silence as a form of participation to foster a more inclusive class environment. She asserts that verbal communication is only one style of learning and accepting silence as a meaningful student

response moves towards understanding multiple forms of learning. This does not mean that talk should be eliminated, but Schultz does assert that “attention to silence alongside talk will lead to more equitable classrooms that hold the possibility of honoring the contributions of all students” (80). This means that for instructors, listening for and interpreting silence is just as important as responding to traditional classroom articulation.

Addressing Concerns

Justifiably, many people evaluate participation and engagement in the classroom solely based on the ease of one to speak up verbally. While this may be the most conventional form of classroom engagement, it is short-sided to not consider other ways that female students have learned to advocate while burdened by the “politics of politeness” (Nurjanah 149.) In Oktanika Wahyu Nurjanah’s explanation of the politics of politeness in "Male and Female Student’s Linguistic Politeness in Speaking Classroom," she describes this phenomenon as fostering “linguistic politeness” in the classroom, where students use formal language and avoid being too dominant. Nurjanah emphasizes that women are more likely than men to adopt the strategy of linguistic politeness because they have internalized secondary status and assume that more politeness is expected from them (150). This is important because advocacy usually requires someone to be assertive rather than polite, so by engaging in linguistic politeness, women have a harder time speaking up in the classroom than their male counterparts. Many are likely concerned that appreciating female silence counters women empowerment by failing to uplift their voices. But quite on the contrary, recognizing when silence is used as an advocacy tool is a way of appreciating all the hard work that women have to do behind the scenes and typically don't get recognition for. When a group is suppressed from speaking up, such as women who are taught by society to be submissive, their advocacy techniques should not be evaluated in the

same way as the privileged group. Thus, we cannot frame the solution based on the ways that men speak up in the classroom, because (for better or for worse) men and women are socialized completely differently. As mentioned prior, men have been socialized within the academic world to be assertive and outspoken while female students are given the opposite message. Throughout the years of societal-based gendered classroom oppression against female students, they have not passively accepted these roles. Rather, women do advocate for themselves in the classroom, it is just not necessarily through conventional oral speech. This does not mean that the forms of advocacy that women have used in place of verbal speech should be ignored or discounted for framing the solution. For example, when considering development strategies in developing nations, women empowerment and involvement in the economy looks a lot different to men's involvement in the economy since women have different needs than men due to the oppression they have traditionally faced in their community.

When women do use their voice assertively in the classroom and in all other sectors of life, they are often penalized. In an episode of the podcast "The Fairer Cents" about women, money and power that is titled "Women's Voices," hosts Perez and Hester describe a woman using her voice to mean she is "trusting her voice" (13:02). By this definition, women have to be able to know and trust their own voice in order to be able to speak up in the classroom. But women often do not trust their voice when they are trying to be assertive because society tells women that it is un-ladylike to have opinions, and women are quickly called "aggressive" or "divisive" when they speak up. Therefore, women have a hard time trusting themselves and breaking free from linguistic politeness and therefore have wielded silence rather than speech. This being said, many women in the classroom use deliberate silence as a form of advocacy.

Although this may seem like a lack of advocacy, it is used strategically to contribute to intellectual discourse.

Proposed Solution Implementation

Because silence is often used by women as a strategic force of advocacy, it is important that teachers hold themselves accountable for listening to this form of advocacy and therefore be able to recognize when it occurs in the classroom to better support female students. Silin asserts that it would be wrong for silence to be held against students (42), and this becomes more true when we take into account that silence is a method adopted by suppressed female students in order to engage in classroom situations that were built only for male classmates. In Schultz's analysis of silence in the classroom, she suggests that teachers both need to understand silence as a form of advocacy and use silence in their own teaching methods in order to promote its value. The first step is simply recognizing and acknowledging silence, specifically female students, as a form of classroom engagement. With this recognition, female students' advocacy will not go unnoticed and thus they will be more empowered in knowing that they are "heard." Schultz says, "silence is a useful strategy teachers can use to pay attention to students' silence, viewing silence as a stance that students consciously choose or a situation that's produced by classroom dynamics and structures" (80). In other words, teachers may have to physically make space and time to interpret the silence of female students and then appreciate their advocacy. Similarly, Frawley suggests that instructors "pay attention to the time variable." If teachers slow down and take ample time to survey the room after they ask a question, for example, they might be able to tell more easily which students are engaging through silence. Also, research shows that boys tend to call out answers or raise their hands quicker than girls, so if teachers take a

pause it could be more likely that female students would choose to speak up in the discussion. And if they do not speak up, teachers should not automatically dismiss their silence as disengagement. In general, Frawley suggests that instructors give opportunities for all learning styles in the classroom, which may constitute active listening and not necessarily conventional collaboration.

Conclusion

All of my own experiences of feeling voiceless in the classroom have piled up and inspired me to do the research for this paper. As a political science student, I know that I have opinions. But it has not always felt like I have had the space and time to share these opinions in the classroom, and I have felt as though this has taken away from my intellectual advancement as well as my power to challenge my peers. So, I tasked myself with exploring why female students have trouble speaking up in the classroom against their male classmates. From my research, I learned that there are complex dimensions to why women have trouble speaking up in the classroom based on a long history of oppression. It's not that women have never advocated for themselves in the classroom, they have just had to learn how to advocate in non-conventional senses, such as through silence. The importance of advocacy through silence is not something I was expecting to find. I have always thought about advocacy in the conventional sense - verbally speaking up. But female silence is severely undervalued. Now, teachers must take the role in interpreting the silence of their students in order to wield them the power they deserve in the classroom. Only rewarding conventional advocacy means losing everything that women say through silence. It's time to take silence seriously.

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