Blog Post: Why Introverts Shouldn’t Be Forced to Talk in Class

By Katherine Schultz
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Today’s guest post is by Katherine Schultz, dean of the school of education at Mills College. She will present on “Silence: A Form of Classroom Participation” at the Mandel Center’s annual Teacher Forum on Sunday, March 3.

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Jessica Lahey, a high school teacher and writer, argues in the Atlantic magazine that introverts should be required to speak in class. She claims that classroom participation grades are not only fair but are necessary. Drawing on recent work on introverts (e.g., Susan Cain’s popular new book, “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking”), she suggests that in order to be successful in today’s world, it is imperative that introverted students be taught and coerced through grades and expectations to participate in class.

I disagree. Lahey paints students who are quiet in her class with a broad brush, calling them all “introverts.” The truth is that there are many reasons students may choose not to verbally participate in school. Some students are painfully shy and perhaps even introverts. Other students choose their moments to speak carefully, participating in silence for long periods before they decide to speak aloud. Some are quiet in school and loud in other contexts. Sometimes a student’s silence protects her from ridicule or bullying. In many cultures, silence is a sign of deep respect and more highly valued than talk. I would argue that Lahey’s advocacy for grading or counting classroom participation ignores the value and uses of silence in the classrooms, overlooking the myriad of other ways students participate.

Lahey also locates students’ silences in individuals rather than understanding them as a product of group interaction and situations. The students she worries about are ones she labels as “introverts,” assuming it is a characteristic of the student rather than the circumstance that creates the silence or reticence. I would suggest, instead, that it is useful to look at how classrooms and other contexts create silences in youth. Rather than punishing the so-called introverts for their silence or forcing them to speak by grading their classroom participation, teachers like Lahey might inquire into the silence of certain students in their classrooms, looking into the reasons for their silence, the places where they are more vocal, and imagining other ways they might be encouraged to participate.

In my own work, I suggest that we redefine what we mean by classroom participation. Teachers often define classroom participation as a verbal response that fits into a routine that the teacher has established. (Typically, the teacher asks a question, the student responds and the teacher affirms the correctness of the answer. Students are then said to
participate. But can students participate without speaking out loud? Should teachers consider the times that a student gives silent assent to a question or thoughtfully jots notes for a future essay as participation? Are these useful forms of participation? It is important to note that one student’s silence can enable another student to speak. Do students have a responsibility to contribute to the silence of a classroom so that others can talk, along with a responsibility to contribute verbally to the discussion? How might silence be re-framed as a “productive” or useful contribution to classroom classrooms? Finally, how do we create other contexts for participation such as multimedia projects where students “speak” through recorded text.

Lahey claims that she wants to prepare her students for the future where verbal participation is critical for their success. I suggest instead that we rethink how we understand students’ silences. I want us to remain cautious about labeling children as introverts, rather than understanding the larger contexts of how and why they choose to participate in certain ways. Otherwise, the particular contributions these students make to the classroom community may be unheard, unrecognized, and discounted. The absence of talk might lead a teacher to assume the absence of learning. It may be difficult for a student to escape the label of the “silent” student or the “introvert.”

There are potentially grave consequences for students when teachers do not understand their silence as a form of participation. Narrow interpretations of the meanings of silence can lead to false assumptions about student participation in classroom activities. For instance, students who are silent might receive low grades for classroom participation, when in fact they are actively engaged in learning. Rather than working to fix or change “introverts” I suggest we understand the various reasons students choose to participate verbally in classrooms or to refrain from such participation. Shouldn’t our goal as educators be to rethink our classroom as places that support all students to learn?