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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Quiet Please: Making Space for Silence

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Blog Series: 12 Surprises When Lecturing Less

October 08, 2013

Tags: collaborative learning | classroom dialogue | critically reflective teaching

I was sitting around the seminar table with eighteen students in a course on religion and



popular culture. To get the discussion started, I asked them about the results of their web-based research on firsthand accounts of becoming a *Star Trek* fan. Numerous hands went up, research results were shared and analyzed, and a meaningful discussion ensued. This pattern of engagement continued throughout the semester. In many ways, I viewed this class as a success. Great discussion is often the summit that we active-learning teachers seek to reach, but in some strange way I struggled with this particular success.

Typically I have been so busy trying to foster participation (beyond the regular 4-6 contributors) that I've never really thought about what to do when most, if not all, of the

students have something to say. It was a little overwhelming and I found myself occasionally missing the awkward silences that I had always perceived as the enemy of my great discussion



goal. What was going on? As I thought about this, I realized that letting go of lecture had revealed my students' abilities and lives to me in a new way. I saw their engagement, their commitment to learning, and the results of their research. I also saw their amazingly detailed color-coded planners. Before class, I'd hear about all the things they had to do that week and began to understand why they rarely came to office hours. I also began to realize the source of my discomfort: The intense and fast-paced discussions we had in class echoed the intensity and busyness of their lives. It made me wonder when (or if) my



students with lives scheduled from morning until late night had time to process all of the ideas we had discussed and the questions we had raised in class. Did they reflect on the discussion or just move on to the next activity, the next assignment? (I suspect the latter.) When did they have time to sit and think? (I doubt they do.) For me, this raises important questions for us as teachers: How do we challenge rather than simply add to the frenetic pace of our students' lives? What example do we set? How do we help them make space for silence?

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