

# The Teacher

# Whose Voice Do You Hear? (An Experiment in Nonverbal Communication)

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**T**he idea of not speaking for 18 weeks seemed absurd but worth the risk. Whenever I taught creative writing, I made it a goal to try something innovative. I had tried working nonverbally in the past, but usually just the first day. Ninety days would be a challenge.

In *Teaching As a Subversive Activity*, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner offer several suggestions for teachers. One of them caught my attention and reinforced the idea of the experiment.

One of the largest obstacles to the establishment of a sound learning environment is the desire of teachers to get something they think they know into the heads of people who don't know it. An English teacher teaching math would hardly be in a position to fulfill this desire. Even more important, he would be forced to perceive the "subject" as a learner, not a teacher (p. 138).<sup>1</sup>

This passage really impressed me because of my own insecurity in teaching writing. As I read on, I found that suggestion number six fit my idea:

6. Limit each teacher to 3 declarative sentences per class and 15 interrogatives.

I thought, "Why not limit the teacher to 0 declarative and 0 interrogative sentences?"

The students were very nervous the first day as I wrote the plan on the board. I explained that since it was indeed a writing class, it seemed only logical that I write for the next 18 weeks. They were incredulous. "Impossible,"

they quipped. "The power of the pen," I rebutted with my chalk.

I was committed to ending the silence if I thought it was counterproductive or disruptive to my students' educational progress. I found, however, that the silence enhanced the writing atmosphere. Why talk when one can write?

I did make one exception. I conducted weekly private conferences to discuss individual student goals and works in progress. I found these interviews helpful, and the classroom silence seemed to heighten the value of my spoken feedback.

Each day in the class brought greater student input. Students would make up assignments and read each other's work out loud. Eventually they arrived at a way of assessing the work. Behavior was never a problem because the focus was writing. Occasionally, the students would begin intellectualizing about writing, but I found I could get them back to their manuscripts if I began writing my feelings about productivity on the board. If I was talking less and writing more, they could talk less and write more.

In times of frustration, I found the process of writing beneficial because I couldn't act impulsively. Each act of communication took thought and deliberation. Therefore, my ideas became clear and succinct.

As the silence stretched into weeks, I tried using the overhead projector, tape-recorded messages, guest speakers, student messengers, and sign language. The students seemed to enjoy the process. Each week I would solicit input on the silence. Some of the students would complain; but when asked if they wanted the silence broken, they insisted that I keep my mouth shut.

As we approached the end of the semester, I knew I would have to break the silence, and I wanted the occasion to be special. I really was stumped as to what should break the quiet, when at last something broke.

I had been trying for weeks to convince the writers to find their own platform, find an audience. I suggested that they submit their work to publishers. I wrote notes to them about art, about appreciation, and about rejection. I shared my feelings about rejection and how in

our household we celebrated rejection by going out to dinner.

The day finally arrived. Kirsten walked up to me proudly and handed me her letter. A rejection! I looked up. The students, sensing the importance, gave me their eyes. I announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to read the following letter of rejection addressed to one of our fellow writers."

In the end, I found myself renewed and excited because my risk had paid off. The absence of my voice in the front of the class meant that another voice was heard. That voice was the spirit of the creative writing class of Mankato West High School, spring 1989.

<sup>1</sup>N. Postman and C. Weingartner, (1969), *Teaching As a Subversive Activity*, (New York: Dell Publishing).

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