



Why Won't They Talk?? What to make of student silence ...

Student silence, though frustrating, is rarely personal! Assume it's not personal, avoid the temptation to answer your own questions, and engage in some diagnostic thinking instead!

Possible causes of student silence include:

- Students are thinking but need time to formulate a response.
- Students didn't hear the question.
- Students don't understand the question.
- Students understand the question but don't know the answer.
- Students haven't read and therefore are unprepared to answer the question.
- Students are bored.
- Students weren't paying attention when the question was posed.
- Students didn't understand the concept in lecture.
- Students are uncomfortable volunteering answers in front of people they don't know.
- Students fear the risk of giving a wrong answer.
- Students are reflective thinkers who don't synthesize best "on their feet."
- Students understand but prefer not to talk in public.
- Students are not challenged by the question.
- It's personal; they just don't like the leader (*most feared; least probable!*)



Possible teaching responses to the above situations include the following:

- Waiting.
- Repeating the question.
- Rephrasing the question clearly.
- Prompting for an answer
 - By giving a hint.
 - By providing part of the answer.
 - By asking a simpler question.
 - By modeling the reasoning involved in answering a similar question (then asking them to apply the same logic).
- Inviting them to use a learning support for a moment to help them answer such as
 - notes
 - text
 - peer
 - book excerpt.
- Varying
 - Vocal tone, pitch, volume.
 - Amount of visual support accompanying discussion.
 - Direct instruction with application tasks.
- Varying the type of student response requested
 - Volunteer, randomly chosen by name (individual response)
 - Choral response, show of hands, gesture (whole group response)
- Re-teaching.
- Investing time in developing a sense of classroom community by means of introductions and pairs/group work.
- Modeling your own thought process including mistakes. Create an environment in which risk-taking is valued more than the correctness of answers.
- Giving students a moment to write about the topic before continuing the discussion.
- Having students discuss the answer with a partner or in small groups.
- Increasing the difficulty of the questions (move up Bloom's taxonomy).
- Making sure you're
 - asking fair questions (as opposed to mind-reading challenges)
 - responding well to *all* student contributions, including the inaccurate ones.

Silence is a form of student feedback, and students appreciate a leader who can use that feedback to make teaching changes designed to ensure their success.