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The Meaning of Silence for Mastering the Practitioner's Reflective Skills

Abstract

The aim of the article is to show the meaning of practicing silence, enhancing the quality of the reflective skills of the reflective practitioner. These skills – being, speaking, disclosing, testing, and probing – reveal one's reflective competences, which require time and silence to be developed. The reflective practitioner is a person who can creatively interact with their true-self, others, the world, and God. Therefore, he or she finds time to distance themselves from many stimuli that bombard the mind and the outer environment and treats silence and quietness more as a challenge, rather than a threat to their own existence. Silence, perceived as a space for finding a new quality of one's identity, is presented in the paper in different perspectives. The meaning of listening silence is especially worth noticing in the domain of education, which is preoccupied with large streams of information coming from varied sources that demand to be acquired. That is why this goal seems important for those who must cope with matters connected with teaching, learning, upbringing, and development. I attempt to deal with this briefly in a theoretical, practically-oriented analysis by suggesting some solutions covered in the material below.

Keywords: silence, reflection, reflective skills, reflective practitioner, noise

Introduction

To show the meaning of silence in mastering the reflective skills of a reflective practitioner demands a focus first of all on understanding the terms that reveal the reflective competences of a reflective practitioner: silence, reflection, and reflective skills. These terms appear to co-exist since it is difficult to discuss them separately. Silence seen in the perspective of neurobiology and psychology, philosophy, and theology provide information about the meaning of silence in integral human development. However, time is needed to build a fruitful reflection upon oneself, others, the world, and God. This fosters the mastering of reflective skills, which enable the process of knowing one's true-self better and can be reflected in the process of consciously shaping one's own identity. The results of this process are transferred into the social area of creating a mature society. Recognizing one's role in society on the micro and macro levels helps one perform life tasks and overcome various obstacles, provided that reflection accompanies one's activities. The approach of being a reflective person seems to be a challenge nowadays, particularly because noise and hustle become more and more oppressive. Noise, as a constant factor determining our outer and inner world, spoils our peace and quiet. It bombards our senses with a huge amount of stimuli coming from different sources. Here, it is worth citing Steve Taylor, who claimed,

we spend all our time living outside ourselves, lost in the external world of activity and stimuli or in the inner world of our own thoughts. We're like a person who plans to go away for a few days but finds so much to occupy them in the place they go to that they never go home again, and never again experience the peace and contentment which lie there. This is certainly one of the reasons why so many people nowadays seem to live in a state of dissatisfaction – because they've lost touch with the natural happiness inside them. That natural happiness has been buried underneath a storm of external stimuli and what Meister Eckhart called "the storm of inward thought." (Taylor, 2020, para. 16)

Therefore, we can state that noise also penetrates deep into the educational area. Teachers and learners are more or less vulnerable to it, and become more or less resilient to silence, and, in fact, to reflection. Considering such aspects shown briefly, the idea of dealing with the issue raised in this paper seems justified and lies at the core of my interests. The theoretical analytic/synthetic method applied in the article helps build the implications that may provoke further research discussions with a practical orientation in the field of education, particularly from the personalistic perspective. The aim of the article is to exploit the meaning of practicing silence to enhance the quality of the reflective skills of a reflective practitioner and to respond to the question, What is the meaning of silence in developing the reflective skills of a reflective practitioner?

Silence and Its Meaning in the Life of a Person

Discussing matters connected with silence brings about the need to look at it in two dimensions: outer and inner. The outer dimension of silence is closely connected with the external natural environment, enabling the person to hear, for example, falling drops of rain, a rushing river, singing birds, etc. It is aligned with the specific surrounding quietness, where noise coming from different sources is reduced or eliminated. The outer silence is aligned with an inner one that takes place in the internal personal environment of life. Crucially, "internal and external environments do not act independently on the individual but rather work together to shape thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (Paoletti & Ben-Soussan, 2020). In the context of silence, this thesis can suggest that outer and inner silence have a reciprocal impact on each other, which can be reflected in examples of human approaches to the self, others, the world, and God. Hence, this connection can be seen in practicing and mastering the reflective skills of a reflective practitioner, which will be demonstrated below.

Eliciting the meaning of silence for human life seen from a personalistic perspective means assuming that spirituality is the central point of the structure of one's entity, enabling one's formation and leading

to a new, enriched identity that conditions a better personal and social life, which takes place through transformative creativity (Szymańska, 2017). It can occur when the person has a disposition for learning that determines the process of constant transformation taking place in her/his inner and outer environment. Thus, a higher level of personal, social, cultural, and spiritual identity can be achieved when the circumstances fostering human growth are set in an appropriate configuration, covering many factors, such as silence and the time necessary for reflection. Without reflection built in silence, "the knowledge obtained in the process of learning can be shaped in an instrumental, declarative way that serves the standardization goals" (Szymańska, 2020, p. 102), having nothing in common with qualitative teaching and learning. In this light, the aspect of silence appears to be crucial and cannot be ignored or neglected, especially that there is no place for it in many curricula. Moreover, notions such as "reflection" or "reflective" are often used to describe graduates, who should be equipped with reflective skills, although, in fact, the cramped curricula do not leave room for the time and silence needed to develop and master reflective skills aligned with creative ones.

Here, certain rhetorical questions come to mind: Are such aspects only slogans that many institutions overuse for their own commercial benefits? Are they the subjects of quantitative and qualitative research built on truly caring about the goodness of present and future generations? To respond to these questions, it seems justified in this world of noise to briefly analyze silence and its meaning for human development, helping society to eliminate the noise. This analysis will be shown from chosen neurobiological, psychological, social, cultural, and philosophical perspectives.

The first one can be shown thanks to Patrizio Paoletti, Tal Dotan Ben-Soussan, or Steve Taylor. Paoletti and Ben-Soussan claim that silence tends to be seen "as a means of reaching the state of consciousness without content, or, perhaps more accurately, 'with all content'" (2020). They point out that

a specific set of neurons is dedicated to silence, distinct from those that deal with sound. Silence cannot, therefore, be conceptualized

solely as a cancellation or deletion of sound. This coincides with a fundamental principle of meditative technique, requiring practitioners to move away from rather than eliminate internal chatter, in order to move toward a non-sound, or silence. (2020)

According to Paoletti and Ben-Soussan, “silence also stimulates processes of neurogenesis in the hippocampus, which have in turn been tied to the regeneration of memories and the creation of new associations” (2020). They claim that it can be seen as “the entrance into a state of neutrality with respect to stressors, stimuli, or previous memories. The stressors do not disappear: silence is not the absence of stimuli, but a greater space that allows inner distance and thus better management of stimuli” (2020). According to the authors, this space can be presumed to be saturated with varied information provided by the senses and deepening consciousness. They also state that “silence might enhance a change in consciousness. Some of the key regions active in compassion meditation, including the insula, are involved in developing stronger than usual self and agency” (2020). Such a point of view seems to correspond to the concept of silence by Steve Taylor, who exposes it in his work in the field of psychology and spirituality (2018). In an essay entitled “The Power of Silence,” he stresses the disruptive meaning of outer and inner noise merged with each other, resulting in people being prevented from meeting with their true-self, and in consequence, in spoiling a deep and rich human happiness. The author, distinguishing two dimensions of silence – the inner and outer ones – particularly directs the reader’s attention to the target of inner silence, which is hard to achieve because of the huge range of information and the problems running through our minds, causing permanent inner chatter that leaves no space for silence, which could enable the development of self-consciousness, understanding what is consciousness-in-itself (2020). In this context, we can imply that silence is one of the significant factors that determines the naturally running process of achieving happiness.

The next perspective of understanding silence and its meaning can be the philosophical/theological one. Josephine Marianne Siegmund

says that “noise is bad for the soul and that each person needs moments and spaces of silence” (2017, p. 588). Nowadays silence is frequently seen as something negative, strange, and boring, a lack of speech, failure, and particularly with the outer environment. The author states, “in reality, however, silence is not simply the expression of an absence. True silence is never just the external absence of sound or noise; true silence is a presence of attention” (2017, p. 589). She points out that “silence is constitutive of the very being of the human person. This silence is, at its root, listening – both to others, with whom one exists in communion, and to God (2017, p. 588). She pays attention to two basic features of silence – waiting and listening – that lead to the “readiness to receive the other. This readiness indicates a willingness to welcome the other in the other’s whole being” (2017, p. 590) on the path of dialogue seen as mutual comprehension deepening and transforming those in whom it takes place. The author provides the definition of listening silence. She writes that it “becomes a space for the other, and vice versa. Listening silence is a form of communication, in which the listener gives his being by receiving that of the other” (2017, p. 591). It demands that a person be a mature, attentive listener.

Silence tends to be accompanied by quiet, solitude, and sometimes loneliness. The quiet enables the person to deal constructively with work, which can be reflected in Jane Brox’s essay, “A Social and Personal History of Silence,” where she writes

I live in a quiet house. On a winter’s day, I can hear snow landing on the windowpanes and flames muttering on the stove, tires hissing on the wet street, my cats shifting in their beds. When the weather grows warm, I open the windows, and sometimes a little talk from passersby floats in. Even then, the quiet feels spacious – a place in which my thoughts can roam as I work. (2019)

Kim Haines-Eitzen, dealing with matters connected with Christianity, pays attention to the fact that solitude and loneliness are not the

same, although they can exist together, and both can play important roles in human life, particularly in the lives of artists. She states that

solitude – being alone – has long been praised as a necessary condition for creativity. Author Virginia Woolf, in her book *A Room of One's Own*, offered an extended meditation on the writer's need for solitude. So have many poets. In their writings, May Sarton ("alone one is never lonely") and William Wordsworth ("the bliss of solitude") were especially eloquent in their praise of solitude. Poet Marianne Moore has even argued that "the cure for loneliness is solitude." (2018)

Quietness, silence, solitude, and loneliness become a challenge for our civilization, living in a world dipped in noise. Haines-Eitzen, who conducts research on early Christianity, sees the relationship between them and makes the implication that "the ancient quest for silence can perhaps teach us how to respond to the challenges of our increasingly loud world and find our own silence" (2018).

This perspective can be comprehended by reference to the material of the Carthusian Conferences entitled "The Wound of Love," where we can find that true silence is not the "one day" flower torn out as an embryo. It is the fruit ripening at the price of long and expensive procedures. First of all, it is necessary to work hard in order to keep silence, as it defies human natural dispositions. The path of silence requires time, humility, a strong yet wise will, persistence, readiness, an willingness to give up things that may disturb it, self-consciousness, concentration, and spontaneity (Konferencje Kartuskie [Carthusian Conferences], 2004, pp. 81–91). However, practicing true silence can present some dangers. Therefore, care in proceeding it is a must. Silence cannot be treated as a crucial activity of intellect and strong will that allows emotions, thoughts, and imagination to be controlled, because such an attitude toward silence makes it an artificial object of itself. Next, silence cannot be seen as end itself. Silence cannot be treated mainly as effort put into an activity that is also aimed at developing the ability of non-verbality. The Carthusian percep-

tion of true silence exposes the fact that it takes place in the depth of a pure human heart, according to the abilities of a person responding to their will, even if it is not perfect. For them, it facilitates meeting with God in a person's heart (2004, pp. 110–112).

Entering silence can help one to understand, experience, and make progress in moving from the first room to the seventh one in an appropriate, needful order, as explained by Saint Theresa from Avilla (Szymańska, 2017, pp. 242–243). It can also foster the process of meditation and contemplation designed according to the thinking of Ignatius Loyola (Gallagher, 2015).

The brief overview of some aspects of silence that can be defined in a positive dimension as a creative space enabling a fruitful, inner-conscious meeting with one's true-self, others, and God. It has a deep educative and therapeutic meaning. It fosters true happiness shared with others in peace, love, joy, and sacrifice. Silence also enables a spiritual community to be created with God and others, while building the inner holy temple for God.

- enhancing self-consciousness
- stimulating the holistic, integral development of a person (physical, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual)
- integrating the inner and outer environment of human life
- facilitating the achievement of human happiness
- having a therapeutic effect
- fostering creativity
- fostering learning

In the context shown above, it is worth emphasizing that silence does not serve those who do not know if they are ready to enter it, when they are not prepared to practice it, etc. In those who associate silence mainly with solitude and who are vulnerable to the permanent outer stimuli, it can make them depressive. In such a situation, reflection upon one's own sense of life and identity appears to be a challenge.

Silence Enhancing the Development of Reflective Practitioner's Skills

Understanding silence and its functions correlates with mastering reflective skills. Dealing with this issue is connected with the term "reflection" as understood by such scientists as John Dewey, Donald A. Schön, David Boud, Rosemary Koegh, David Walker, and others mentioned by Atilla Çimer, Sabiha Odabaşı Çimer, and Gülşah Sezen Vekli (2013, pp. 133–149). In the context of this scientific paper, the definition by Joy Amulya seems to be suitable:

reflection is an active process of witnessing one's own experience in order to take a closer look at it, sometimes to direct attention to it briefly, but often to explore it in greater depth. This can be done in the midst of an activity or as an activity in itself. The key to reflection is learning how to take perspective on one's own actions and experience – in other words, to examine that experience rather than just living it. (2011)

This definition correlates with Schön's view on reflection, which embraces time and experience, providing new perspectives, enabling a more complete perception of the person in his/her emotions, feelings, beliefs, intellect, will, motives, interests, etc., and referring to knowledge by action, in action, and on action obtained during the processes of learning (Schön, 1991). These understandings of reflection can correspond to the definition of it provided from a personalistic perspective:

Reflection is the inner, active, dynamic process covering the whole integrated (biologically, psychologically, socially, culturally, and spiritually) person, revealing its quality in a particular act that arises from concrete experience taking place in a concrete period of time, and the knowledge obtained either consciously or un-consciously that needs to be formed in order to achieve personal and social growth. It is determined

anthropologically, morally, axiologically, and psychologically.
(Szymańska, 2017, p. 130)

Comparing the perspectives of silence with its functions and the above reflection, the common ground which covers the active, dynamic, inner processes that take place in the whole person seen as one entity seems clear. As reflection requires time and silence, I submit that reflection without silence cannot exist, and that practicing the reflective skills – being, speaking, disclosing, testing, and probing (Raelin, 2002, pp. 66–74) – requires it. I assume that its quality depends on the quality of reflective training, which enables the person to understand their true-self and others (Day, 1999, p. 229).

Therefore, starting with the first reflective skill, *being*, which shapes the metaphysical and existential dimension of the past, present, and future and enables one to look deeper into oneself from a newly re-examined moral – vertical and horizontal – perspective that forms a new understanding of experience and the theoretical/practical knowledge gained so far in the process of life-long learning. The reflective queries can become the means for locating the self in the metaphysical and existential area of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships that coexist with each other. They intervene with silence, which should be the matrix for them and other skills. Silence implies the need for a temporary distancing from oneself, others, and the issues going on in the world. Certain questions gain a new appearance from the distance that can be called creative distance: Who am I? Who are those standing by me? Where do I go and what for? What is the true meaning of my life? What is my mission in the world, my vocation? etc. These questions provide the knowledge that should be examined in relation to God, other people, and the world. When they are connected with silent meditation and contemplation, they can indicate new directions for life and can foster the creation of a brave openness for accepting things that can be rejected or seem inconvenient at first sight. Discovering them from the depth of the self “forces” a person to engage in some activities, even if they require a kind of heroism.

Practicing the skill of being is connected with the skill of *speaking*, which is crafted during silence and helps to appropriately order matters that demand to be expressed or exposed. Silence enables one to avoid using unnecessary words or posing trivial, meaningless questions. Distance, quietness, and a sense of constructive solitude can help formulate and articulate assumptions, points of view, and argumentation with an attitude of deep respect and dignity toward others and the self, which indicates the value of personalistic communication with the self, others, the world, and God. Questions – such as How well do I know my dialogue partner? Do I respect him/her? How should I conduct the narration with him/her? How do I react to my opponents? Is the dialogue creative and beneficial for both subjects? (Szymańska, 2020, p. 109) – which are built in silence, are selected in the light of personalistic metaphysical/existential perspective, regulating the emotional and intellectual commitment to many matters. This masters the next reflective skill, *disclosing*.

Disclosing, according to Raelin (2002, p. 73), may reveal the depth of human experience that can be shared in a mature way with others. Silence can help a person to make decisions on what can be disclosed during communication with others, as well as when, where, and why. Consideration of the benefits and losses should not be neglected, particularly when the truth cannot be acceptable to others, as in many cases of the lives of saints and heroes. Purity of the heart formed in silence and disclosed in the world, can be seen as an enemy, as silence is perceived by many in the world of noise. It can be understood as a key for testing oneself and others.

The reflective skill of *testing*, which Raelin describes as “an open-ended query directed toward the group as a whole that attempts to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving” (2002, p. 73) requires the previous assumptions to be explored, which can promote a process of wise collective inquiry (p. 73). This skill, mastered in silence, opens the person and society to truth about the self and the community that should be prepared for it. Each member of the community should master their own desires and points of view in order to build constructive, creative participation aimed at the true goodness of all participants. Silence can

help reduce egoism and enhance courage in the face of aggression and many obstacles, as seen in the film *Of Gods and Men* (Beauvois, 2010). Metaphysical/existential questions appearing in the hearts of monks are tested in the space of the heart, to which no one has access. They invoke the inner activity of probing one's sense of reflective being, speaking, disclosing, and testing.

Thus, *probing* – as the fifth reflective skill – can be associated with provoking oneself to be a true witness of truth, love, faith, hope, etc. in collocation with the inner necessity of servitude aimed at building the moral ethos of society. Some questions – Where do my experience and reflection go? How do I try to change my old habits, behavior, feelings, thoughts, and motivation to be a better person? How do I help others to discover various areas of reflection? What do I do to master my personal and professional life in the aspect of the integrity of my being? (Szymańska, 2020, p. 111) – should be reflectively considered before any activities, left before distancing from them in silence, and considered thereafter leaving space for the Spirit.

All in all, I can claim that mastering reflective skills imposes the need to find time for quietness and solitude for considering different matters in the space of silence. Learning and systematically applying the methods or techniques used in practicing silence, such as meditation and contemplation, can stimulate the process of developing reflective skills, which is reflected in a piece by David Hunter entitled *Considering the Role of Silence*.

Silence is the “third speaker in a conversation” (Picard, as cited in Hunter, 2009).

Without silence, all communication would be noise with no center. Moments of silence allow time for thoughts and emotions to process.

Silence embodies a philosophy of openness to others;

A dedication to being open provides space to cultivate the whole human person.

Using reading and writing, we can experience both silence and non-silence while reflecting.

These spaces are opportunities for critical thinking, to witness that which lies there:

Our deeper selves.

The reader has the space to understand and interpret what they have read;

The writer finds the space to reflect: Is this what I want to say?

There is more to communication and writing than just filling space;

Come to a space of silence, and then move beyond... (Hunter, 2009)

The analysis of silence, reflection, etc. raises the following questions: How are reflective skills taught and learned in schools at each step of education? Does schools' core curriculum embrace reflection and silence in the practical domain? Do schools create a space for reflective learning and for learning reflective skills? These questions can also become the subject of research that tests and probes educational policies, where the matters of reflection may be overused without referring to their real meaning. However, it is a must to remember that we cannot manipulate the silence, because it can bring consequences for us, particularly when our desires go somewhere beyond...

Conclusion

The issue of the role of silence in mastering the reflective skills of a reflective practitioner can be seen as a kind of voice, calling for deeper reflection, stimulating the process of consciousness, implying the need to beware of dangers stemming from core curricula crammed with material to be taught and learned. Instrumental knowledge overload does not foster creative or critical thinking, but results in "manufacturing" minds that are eager to be manipulated in different ways. What is worse, it can disturb the process of building a sense of mature personal, social, and cultural identity, and finally – in the future – it can hinder the development of society seen from psychological, philosophical, cultural, and

metaphysical perspectives. These implications come from the above considerations and conversations with students and teachers who cannot find the time to work with the techniques that require silence and reflection. Therefore, the following suggestions can be taken into consideration in the field of education:

- school curricula should include recommendations for practicing reflective skills through the integrated aims and content, which requires these aims to be redefined and the content to be laid out in a co-existential and integral/holistic perspective
- teachers and learners should be taught the principles and methods or techniques for constructing reflection in the horizontal and vertical dimensions
- teachers should become more professional researchers, applying the narrative methods in their work with students regardless of the subjects they teach, which may result in creative competences being mastered
- the promotion of teachers should depend on the quality of their research (based on contemporary knowledge reflected in existing knowledge), assessed qualitatively once every five years
- teachers and students should have the space and time for practicing silence
- school principals should provide teachers with real possibilities to participate in workshops and to develop their reflective skills to a high level

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