

A Time for Silence? Its Possibilities for Dialogue and for Reflective Learning

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Abstract From the beginning of history sounds have played a fundamentally important role in humanity's development as ways of expression and of communication. However in contemporary western society, and indeed globally, we are experiencing an excess of speech and a relentless encouragement to expression. Such excess indicates a misunderstanding about what expression and dialogue should be. This condition encourages us to think about silence, solitude and contemplation and the role they might play in restoring the realm of personal understanding of the *Self* and of one's authentic experience of the *Other*. The purpose of this article is to explore the potency of a silence that arises from our participation in the world. We present first some ideas about silence as a human phenomenon. This is followed by an examination of silence and language, an investigation of silence in dialogue, and of its educational implications. The article concludes by emphasising the value of silence as potency in itself, assisting in recovering the expressive powers of language. We argue that it is important to understand the positive status of silence in order to recognise and avoid repressive speech and to introduce its potential for reflective learning.

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“To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven.... a time to keep silence and a time to speak.” Ecclesiastes: Chapter III, Verses 1 and 7.

Introduction

We live in a world full of sounds and of daily, almost incessant, encounters with others, through the sounds we make and the symbols that are offered. The sonority of nature in general, animals, places, things, and people, enriches our perception and understanding of the world. Sound has played a crucial role in human development as a way of expression and of communication. But what is the role of silence, solitude, and of contemplation? In contemporary western society, and indeed globally, we are experiencing a tidal wave of sound and speech, together with relentless pressure for personal expression. However, much of this is *noise* rather than genuine *communication*. Such excess indicates a misunderstanding about what expression and dialogue should achieve for humanity. As a result, discourse becomes superficial or even a monologue in which *listening* is replaced by *hearing*. It is this contemporary condition that encourages us to think about silence, solitude, and contemplation and the role they might play in restoring personal understanding of the *Self* and of authentic experience of the *Other* through reflective learning.

The positive force of silence in education has often been noted (Caranfas 2004; Lees 2012). Lewin comments that: “Perhaps schools, colleges, and universities should do more to encourage quiet times, pauses, reflections, and silences, to create spaces or attention and contemplation” (2014: 357). In this direction we have seen the expansion of proposals based on mindfulness applied to learning (Orr 2000; Frauman 2010). It is a critique of a model based on standardization, routine and uniformity. “Mindfulness is a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to the context” (Langer 2000: 220) which could promote creativity, curiosity and enthusiasm. Such mindfulness techniques have spread with a therapeutic approach and have been used as a means to sharpen focus and attention (Pareja 2006). However, when reduced to instrumentalism, it is difficult to escape from the idea of it being yet another tool to achieve the same educational goals and objectives.

Silence is also considered a way of being with the *Other* and can be empowering mutually when it creates receptivity for speech. Zembylas (2004: 202) suggests: “to highlighting the limits of speech within the context of expression and to explore the value of silence as a pedagogical process of caring for one’s self and for the Other.” In a similar way Caranfa (2004) proposes silence as a foundation for learning and suggests an “aesthetic of silence”. He argues that the failures of education are direct results of our failure to *listen*. There is instead the supremacy of discourse, but without space for the unknown: whereas silence could be a source for authentic critical thinking. He argues that: “In an aesthetic of silence, the relationship between the teacher and the student is maintained by the mystery, the unknowability of the encounter” (Caranfa 2006: 99). Another example is that of Ratto and Henning, when considering tolerance as a desirable social value in education, who point out that: “...an important first move may be to tolerate the convalescence and the voices of silence, border from where language can actually do something unheard emerge” (2011: 129). Because of the undeniable power of language empty words or meaningless subjects can create an illusion of communication. This raises interesting questions pedagogically for: “...can educators embrace silence without compromising critical talk or marginalising ‘silenced groups’?” and “how can respect for silence in education become a call for respect of the self, otherness, humility, and a sense of

wonder?" (Zembylas 2004: 193). This is not to ignore the violence that emerges from a policy of silence (Orlandi 2007), nor the privilege of language for expression of ideas and criticism. However, the *positive* aspect of silence is that it reminds us of our condition as a *being in the world*, with the possibility of establishing relationships without the mediation of symbols. Silence is also pregnant of meaning and cannot be reduced in the world of language, to only something that was *not* said. It is the presence of the *unknown* in our lives, while silence, often accompanied by solitude provides an opportunity for contemplation and reflection on what has been said, heard or seen.

How then can silence contribute to the value of the *Other's* presence and restore the expressive core at the heart of dialogue? We propose to explore the potency of a silence that arises from our participation in the world. We present first different ideas about silence as a human phenomenon from the perspectives of philosophy, theology, and anthropology. This is followed by an analysis of silence and language, considering our intercorporeal relationship with the world and with the *Other*. We consider the notions of solitude and contemplation and their interrelationship with silence. We consider next some implications for education and learning, e.g. how dialogue is enhanced through reflective learning. We suggest that any encounter, can stimulate a need for personal reflection in silence and perhaps in solitude, to absorb lessons and thus to renew it more effectively. Silence may not be a condition for learning but in such dialogical experiences it should be considered for its possibilities, such as attention, focus or further exchange. A broad understanding of the possibilities silence holds indicates respect for the *Other's* posture facing the world. Finally, we conclude by emphasising the value of silence as *potency* in itself, assisting in recovering the expressive powers of language. We argue that it is important to understand this capacity of silence if we are to recognise and avoid repressive speech. We wish to show that dialogue at it needs more than words if it is to be effective.

Approaching Silence

Silence is a very rich phenomenon although it is often considered only as an *absence*. Nevertheless, it receives attention from different fields in the sciences, including the social sciences, the humanities, and especially from the creative arts. Neuroscience for instance investigates silence as a stimulus of brain plasticity and neurogenesis (Kirste et al. 2013; Voisin et al. 2006). On the other hand, poets and other writers recognise the power of silence when they declare its presence in their poems, novels and plays. A famous example is Shakespeare's play *Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark*, which reaches the celebrated conclusion: "*The rest is silence.*" (Act V, Scene 2). Silence can be terrifying, oppressive, comforting, empty or full of meaning. It also inspires musicians, such as John Cage¹ who dedicated part of his work on investigations into silence: "*...not one sound fears the silence that extinguishes it. And no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound*" (Cage 1959: 135).

Silence also plays a very important role in mysticism and in religion, and is very often connected with anthropological notions of the sacred (Orlandi 2007). The taboo of silence is observed in the study of the sacred and the profane in many cultures (Eliade 1987). Monastic silence is a spiritual practice found in a number of religious traditions over the centuries, and to which we shall return to below. The point is that, while we think *about*

¹ *4' 33''*, a musical composition that consists entirely of silence, is John Cage's most famous creation. It has become a sort of icon in post-war culture.

silence only rarely, the *presence* of silence often makes us reflect, or leaves thought in suspension. Certain events, challenges, situations, places, people, and even words require it, but the opposite happens also: silence can provoke us into contemplation of what we have encountered, into reflection on the dialogue in which we have been engaged; and which has been suspended temporarily. However, independently of the context, it brings a *potency* not always fully carried out. This was a point made theologically by the Jesuit Karl Rahner in *Encounters with Silence* (1999), his famous discussion of mankind's attempts at dialogue with God. In a similar way, Max Picard, in *The World of Silence* (1954) proposes that silence is not merely the *absence* of noise, something negative, but a phenomenon in itself. This suggests that silence is a complex and positive phenomenon, the potential of which is often ignored by educators (Caranfa 2006).

Although the possibilities and the consequences of *silence* now receive more attention, its simple application as a technique remains risky (Lewin 2014). For example, the concept does have negative, even sinister implications, such as in the verb *to silence*. We see throughout history the use of such *silencing* to suppress voices and points of view unwelcome to the silencers, usually those in political and ideological authority. The experience of the astronomer Galileo Galilei is a classic example of religious censorship. The Roman Catholic Church judged him guilty of heresy for supporting Copernicus's heliocentric idea in the early seventeenth century (Machamer 2014; Brecht 2010). Another very well-known case is that of Sir Thomas More condemned to death, in sixteenth century England as his *silence* was understood as a refusal to support King Henry VIII as the Supreme Head of a national Church of England (Bolt 1990; Mantel 2009). A "policy of silence" can be both a mark of oppression and of resistance which damages the creative potential of silence as the experience of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes throughout history provides witness.

Silence can also return dignity to discourse. For instance, in considering the atrocities of the twentieth century, Steiner (1967) argues that speech disguises the falsehoods of totalitarian regimes, while it also carries a vulgarity and imprecision common in a world of mass consumption. Although he is pessimistic about the future of language, Steiner does raise important considerations about the oppressive use of words. This was anticipated in the nineteenth century by Arthur Schopenhauer (1893) who criticized the consumption of trivial literature and the poverty of thought hidden by prolix expression. The first rule of good style, he said, is to have something meaningful to say and that: "A writer must make a sparing use of the reader's time, patience and attention; so as to lead him to believe that his author writes what is worth careful study, and will reward the time spent upon it" (Schopenhauer 1893: 29). Seriousness with language does justice to the power of expression. This argument is renewed, for instance in a well-known essay by George Orwell, first published in 1946. He argues that the use of ready-made phrases makes discourse both easy and poor and comments that: "... prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse" (Orwell 1968: 130). Such use has political consequences when it hides the truth or makes the message unclear. This can also be found in contemporary so-called progressive societies, which are prepared to *silence* certain points of view in the name of "political correctness". An analysis of the irrational cultivation of "political correctness" in language pays attention to "the mismatch between freedom of expression" guaranteed by law in many countries and "culturally-oriented actions to patrol the linguistic usage, which prohibit references to the behaviour or characteristics of certain social groups, especially minorities" (Neves 2012, 206). Political correctness flags prejudices and condemns intolerance present in inappropriate language. However, considering

that there is no text which is ideologically neutral, the imposition of “correct language”, even from *good intentions* is also a way of silencing. Perhaps there should be a necessary time for silence and reflection in order to recover the truth of speech. On the other hand as Novaes suggests: “...it is also true that without speech, we would be reduced to beings without politics, without tolerance, without poetry, in summary, without the human” (2012: 8).

We suggest that *silence* has its own life which offers many different approaches to thinking. It can be considered as an element of expression, in the elaboration of speech. But it can be considered also in relation to other elements around us without the mediation of speech. However, despite the context, it does not have an obvious and transparent meaning; hence we cannot explain each silence in terms of words (Orlandi 2007). Silence may be considered as having two different conditions, negative and positive. The first is a silence that finds correspondence in words, the unspoken. If this happens through suppression of speech: “thus on both sides—of the silencer and the silenced—repressive silence or repressive speech are states of a distorted, broken, or violently cut conversation” (Gurevitch 2001: 94). This means disciplinary mechanisms of silencing or the politics of silence. “Silence is used as a weapon of subjugation, an act of force against speech, the suffocation of the ‘Other’s’ voice and its potential danger” (Gurevitch 2001: 93). Freire (2005) draws attention to a “culture of silence” that happens through repressive silence and makes critical awareness and response to the concrete reality of the world very difficult. In this sense silence is truly an *absence*. Another way of understanding silence is as a positive phenomenon, as a *presence*, which does not mean simply the lack of words, or even the shadow of signs. In this sense: “Silence is silence and completely different from any kind of language” (Ganguly 1968: 200). It is a different way of signifying as silence does not speak, “silence is”. It is not empty either: “silence means” (Orlandi 2007: 31). Silence can suggest the presence of an unknown, of surprise, openness, doubt and mobility of meaning. Silence is the horizon where language is installed, but it is not only an *instrument* for speech but has *value* in itself.

It is interesting to note that the massive emphasis placed on the value of communication in western society implies an obliteration of silence. We are required to make visible signs continually (Orlandi 2007). It brings an illusion of self-expression in which speech becomes ever more superficial. This allows for a different form of control in a society fascinated by language and communication (Ratto and Henning 2011). It reveals another way of silencing by promptly suggesting speech where previously there was *potency*, leading thoughts along routes that could be different. In education, for instance, if there is often still a repressive silence, there is also an oppressive demand for manifestation: “What are you thinking about?” (Orlandi 2007: 34). It does not mean, however, that teachers engender the necessary conditions for such speech or dialogue. It is questionable if teachers are prepared to be surprised by different manifestations from expected proposals. In many contexts, especially in education, it seems we need to make very clear our positions without place for uncertainty, mistake or venture. The achievement of some fast correct answer, although fostered by questions, does not allow reflection and even means dialogue.

Silence presents itself when we face something which is frightening, astonishing, and perhaps even truly *awesome*. In this sense it requires contemplation or recognition of the insufficiencies of words. One is ‘lost for words.’ Silence may also just follow us through our daily life, revealing our direct contact with a world in which no words are necessary. In contemplative silence, for instance, we withdraw from our egocentric position of deciding what the world means. Such experience suppresses our supremacy as a constitutive subject and shows us that the world has also something to say which we do not yet understand

clearly. It is a circumstance through which we come to understand that mere words are not always enough to deal with the surprises and dilemmas we face. Silence shows that we live without certainty of previous outcomes and allows for elaboration. It shows our inconsistency on understanding the world, which means that we do not live only out of past experiences. Considering silence not as an absence or a void but as a *creative potency*, it is possible to recognise its constitutive character. In this sense silence brings the possibility of reflective choice and indicates a becoming.

Silence and Language

As Ganguly says: "...words are not good enough, they are not rich enough to express the necessary truths, in which are rooted the very meaning and purpose of life" (1968: 196). In order to do justice to expressive speech, Merleau-Ponty (1973a) suggests that we should consider speech *before* it is spoken, and proposes that we rediscover our primordial experience of attachment to the world. Our corporeal presence is the guarantee of a strong relationship with the world through which possible meanings can be established and language arises. Moreover, "speech and understanding are moments in the unified system of self-other." As he says: "I accommodate to the other person through my language and my body" (Merleau-Ponty 1973a, 18). The one "who speaks enters into a system of relations which presuppose his presence and at the same time make him open and vulnerable" (Merleau-Ponty 1973a, 17). So, language takes part in a living system of relationships. As an expressive phenomenon it allows the elaboration of an infinite number of thoughts with finite signs: "Thus, if the language for purposes of communication results from the inalienable need for understanding among humans, it never ceased to confront the perplexing multiplicity semantics of the living world" (Ratto and Henning 2011: 119).

The analysis of silence and of speech thus reveals interesting connections. In his theory of expression, Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) suggests that there are two kinds of speech: the "spoken speech" and the "speaking speech". The first refers to ideas already constituted and expressed that can be evoked through concepts that have an established meaning. The second is constituted at the moment in which it takes place. It is a fresh configuration of the symbols that comprise our universe of communication. The illusion of a direct language happens because empirical language seems to bring complete understanding. However, paradoxically, this is a kind of silence, because "spoken speech" is in fact a sedimented world of acquired linguistic meanings, it brings ready-made thoughts without freshness. On the other hand, "speaking speech" is an expressive gesture which brings freshness and life to our thoughts (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Moreover language is oblique and autonomous. The meaning lies in the gaps and tensions *between* words, by what is said and what is left unsaid. In order to say *something*, it is necessary to not say *everything*. There is a background of silence without which words would be meaningless. In developing this idea Merleau-Ponty points out that: "...we should be sensitive to the thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven" (1973a: 46). This assumption seems to be a good start to think about the presence of silence in dialogue and in education.

Some silence is necessary in order to create a dialogical condition. Since we can learn from dialogue with others, speech presupposes a system of relations between speakers and listeners alternately, where each is open and vulnerable. In genuine dialogue, speaker and listener are caught up in the same experience. Speaking and listening are not distinct

operations and, whether speaking or listening, we establish a bond through which the *Other's* words have an impact:

Between myself as speech and the other as speech, or more generally myself as expression and the other as expression, there is no longer that alternation which makes a rivalry of the relation between minds. I am not active only when speaking; rather, I precede my thought in the listener. I am not passive while I am listening; rather, I speak according to... what the other is saying (Merleau-Ponty 1973b: 143–144).

An analysis of silence offers the opportunity of understanding listening as an active and indeed reflexive act and that: “Positive silence might be better understood as the affirmation of attention in which the noise of the self is lost in submission of the self to the other” (Lewin 2014: 367). These ideas relate to Gabriel Marcel’s concepts of silence and listening and their potency for education. He says: “If one wished to define me, it seems to me that, instead of speaking of me as an existentialist philosopher (a pretentious expression and one that, in the last analysis, is almost empty of meaning), you would have to say quite simply that I am, above all, a listener.” (2005: 70). Fiumara (1990) points out however that western tradition obliterates ‘listening’ in favour of a ‘logos’ reduced to the notion of ‘saying’. This ‘arrogant logos’ may have lost the capacity for attention listening. “It almost seems that ‘culture’ requires aspirants to participate according to their specific qualifications, to become adherents to an immense task of justifying a ‘logic’ that knows very well how to say practically everything and hardly knows how to listen.” (Fiumara 1990: 11). The relationship between listening and speaking is another important way using silence in education. We learn how to listen to the World and to the *Other* with their different postures. This notion of listening means much more than absence or acceptance, but is a posture elaborated in relationship. It is a way of being in the world that does not mean being apart or alienated. Speaking and listening are thus recognized as being in a mutual relationship. In order to be expressive the flow of words from the speaker must have the power of carrying the listener towards a meaning that neither possessed beforehand. Communication presumes an *encounter*, but it also means *freshness*, otherwise neither the speaker nor the listener have anything to learn. The authentic *Other* brings surprise and disorientation which presupposes a transformation of one and another engaged in dialogue (Merleau-Ponty 1973b). In order to understand the power of speech Merleau-Ponty suggests pursuing: “... dialogue a little further—and first of all, in the silent relationship with the other” (1973b: 133). He stresses our intercorporeal relationship with the *Other* and with the world suggesting perception as nascent logos.

Although every speech presents an horizon of silence, there is more to silence than language can represent. Silence helps us to experience uncertainty and doubt, and the suspension between knowing and unknowing. Our experience does not need to be constantly described, explained, or analysed for it to make sense. In this sense, silence may indicate respect for ways of establishing contact with the world other than through speech or through judgements. Silence is thus an opportunity to meet the *Other* through opening possibilities for mutual encounter and dialogue. It challenges the sovereignty of the subject and provides a way of finding one’s self, in other words *learning*. We can extract possible meanings from silence only when we understand it through the experience of participation. The context is relevant because silence is also a system of differentiation. Through such participation we elaborate a unity of sense: the more we are engaged in some experience, the more the whole makes sense (Marcel 2007). Music, for instance, becomes more than a sequence of notes and pauses and: “Great music arises out of silence and sets us back into

silence; it arises out of the composer's silence and establishes the community of listeners who are taken outside their privacy into a communal space of trans-rational meaning" (Wood 2005: 32). Such silence means listening for some announcement or declaration. Furthermore there is a huge difference between a silence that happens in dialogue and a silence that arises without participation. For instance, actors in a play experience silence in an empty theatre differently from silence in a full theatre. In the latter, it is possible to feel its presence as an expectation of a becoming. Therefore, in some circumstances, silence suggests engagement, a quietness built through genuine participation with the potential for learning and expression.

However, although language is such a powerful element of culture, relatively few have stressed the frustration we suffer through our desire to express ourselves, combined with the failure of such expression (Ganguly 1968). There is a close relationship between the crises of social bonds and the progress of communication as utopia, a desire for transparency, understanding and consensus (Breton 1992). There is indeed a privilege of speech on the attainment of critical reflection; however, given the limitations of language, it is possible that silence acquires also a provocative character, for example in the expression 'dumb insolence.' Nevertheless, taking into account the dialogical character of communication and the essential presence of the *Other*, silence helps us to understand both the limits and the richness of language.

Solitude and Contemplation

It is possible to identify the links connecting silence, solitude and contemplation. This is interesting because in pedagogy the importance of silence is linked chiefly to the encounter with the *Other* (Lewin 2014):

Where silence spreads, the individual does not notice opposition between him and the community, the individual and the community are not facing each other, but they are both in front of silence; the difference between the individual and the community stops being important in the face of the power of silence (Picard 1954: 43).

As we have argued, the power of silence lies in its potency: it is pregnant, a birthplace that opens up creation. As Marcel says: "Within the silence I can regain possession of myself. It is in itself a principle of recovery. I should be tempted to say that recollection and mystery are correlatives" (Marcel 2007: 113). He distinguishes also between the mysterious and the problematic, saying: "A problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not before me in its entirety" (Marcel 2007: 100). Silence brings a moment of recovery from the constant demand for utterance, but is also a moment for living a mystery, without the necessity for immediate formulations. Silence also safeguard inconsistency and unpredictability, and allows experimentation. Inhabiting silence can become an experience of solitude that preserves one's autonomy. It can lead to contemplation and to reflection.

Contemplation, the consideration of something deeply, is associated with mysticism. For example, Eastern Orthodox Christianity considers contemplation as facing or having an experience of God. Such religious traditions offer a rich account of the place of silence in human spirituality. For instance, MacCulloch suggests a voyage through silence in the Christian faith and finds that: "...in these progressions, silence commonly took

precedence over noise” (2013: 65). However, the understanding of silence has changed through the centuries of Christian history. It is interesting to observe that: “... after his work of creation, God remained a God of words and communications with his people: like rulers on earth, he was a judge, a pronouncer of commands and admonishments” (MacCulloch 2013: 19). Accordingly, Barthes (1991: 250) points out that: “To listen is the evangelical verb par excellence: listening to the divine word is what faith amounts to, for it is by such listening that man is linked to God” and he reminds us that the Protestant church as well as the Counter-Reformation made the faithful into listeners.

That said early Christianity was very noisy and, as we have noted, attitudes to the silence of the sacred became radically different only over the centuries. Christians had to overcome a social prejudice against silent prayer, a legacy of Judaism. Silence was more commonly connected with death and the darkness: “... the silence of God provokes a chorus of protest, expostulation and anguished supplication” and silent prayer was controversial as well (MacCulloch 2013: 21). Silence can be disturbing if one is looking for orientation or judgement. However, it is possible to observe a growing interest in silence and contemplation through the influence of the general religious culture of the Mediterranean region. The West absorbed much of the mystical dimension of silence from the East. From a noisy beginning, through strong censorship and the quiet monastic life, Christian history built the understanding that silence could be balanced by vocal expression in the pursuit of holiness. Meanwhile, in some circumstances the emphasis was not so much on the content *or practice* of silence as on showing discipline through virtues such as humility and obedience. In this sense, it acquires the outline of oppressive silence. However it is argued that: “... the Christian faith is based on the assertion that there is more to an understanding of silence than simply the interaction of humans with humans, or even of the interaction of humans with societies or landscapes around them” (MacCulloch 2013: 6). As the history of mystic contemplation and meditation shows, transcendence may be reached, but it is not a matter of control. It is very difficult for mystics to explain their experience of such transcendence, as it is challenging to anticipate or to claim specific results from periods of silence.

In classical Greek philosophy the contemplative life is an ideal dedicated to knowledge. The notion of contemplation also approximates to the aesthetic experience. Not surprisingly the arts in general often deal with the world of silence (Malraux 1978). Art requires expression, while silence leaves room for the elaborations of new meanings. Art returns the world to its nascent state with all still undetermined and disturbing (Haar 1994). It brings to life voices of silence and show that silence does not exist only in function of speech. The analysis of solitude and contemplation shows how complex and rich silence can be as a human phenomenon. Again Marcel emphasizes the idea of participation through the experience of our body and through belonging to a community as a kind of commitment. Nevertheless Wood (2005) argues that Marcel also considers himself to be “a sower of silence” and “a sower of solitude”. He draws a parallel with Picard, suggesting that: “Such solitude and such silence, far from separating us from others, are rather the bases for communion with them. Silence and speech as well as solitude and community are not exclusive opposites so much as they are mutual requirements of authentic human existence” (Wood 2005: 32). Silence, solitude and contemplation are not the opposites of expression, of community, or of speech. Instead, they are examples of belonging to the world and reveal a human need for dialogue.

Silence in Dialogue and Its Possibilities for Reflective Learning

Dialogue is a key focus for philosophers and educators such as Emmanuel Lévinas (1969), Buber (2002), and Freire (2005). As we have noted, speech is fundamental to it because of its properties of expression. However, silence must, as we have shown, be considered as part of dialogue. It exposes the deep roots of dialogue that come from our human condition which precedes language. Buber (2002) argues that dialogue does not need words and that an authentic conversation may take place in silence. This can be understood when one considers that silence is sometimes described as deafening, or sad, worrying, stern, and so on, and that often we wish for a word to put an end to an embarrassing silence. At this point, it is important to stress the contextual condition of dialogue: “a dialogue is not simply a momentary engagement between two or more people; it is a discursive relation situated against the background of previous relations involving them and the relation of what they are speaking today to the history of those words spoken before them” (Burbules and Bruce 2001: 1111). This situated condition makes dialogue a system of complex relationships. The use of words indicates a search for clarity, while silence brings uncertainty. Here we are not only talking about some content or subject of dialogue, but about the own experience of dealing with differences. In a partaken silence, for instance, people do not necessarily share the same meaning, but they do share the same experience, each taking part in the other’s existence. This supports the idea of dialogue as an inter-corporeal experience, which we have considered elsewhere (Zimmermann and Morgan 2011).

Given this possibility Polanyi’s concept of tacit knowledge, or “we can know more than we can tell”, should be re-considered (Polanyi 1966: 4). Our corporeal condition carries with it a wisdom that is not dependent on words. As he says: “We recognize the moods of the human face, without being able to tell, except quite vaguely, by what signs we know it” (Polanyi 1966: 5). Tacit knowing is not controlled by reasoning, but rather because: “We become aware of our operation of it only in the silencing of a noise” (Polanyi 1966: 14). Such arguments are consonant with the notion of *intentionality* from the perspective of an embodied mind explored by Merleau-Ponty (Jha 2002). Merleau-Ponty (1962) recovers the phenomenological body as the vehicle of being in the world, which carries the ultimate possibility of all knowledge, through the unity of consciousness with the world and the intentional threads, which attach us to it. As Polanyi again says: “It brings home to us that it is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning.” (Polanyi 1966: 18).

This does not mean a kind of naïve interaction with the world as a simple reaction, but throws light on the silent experience of the body of learning. It is not about reducing knowledge to perception but about the birth of all knowledge which can be in silence. Considering this we argue that education is not only about the acquisition of knowledge in terms of ‘spoken speech’. It is more than that, the elaboration of a way to approach and communicate with the world. In this sense, the study of silence may outline different possibilities of investigating the world and participating in dialogue. Hence, the experience of thinking is an exploratory process of investigation. We argue that thinking is more than being in possession of words or ideas; it is also the exploration of thoughts, dwelling in them through reflection. It is a process of exploring our perspectives on the world. Reflection is not an unilinear process, but a dialogical one which should take into account gaps and silences. It means reconsidering something, contemplating ideas, modifying, combining, extending and exploring how they became ideas in the first place. It is an

attempt at understanding with learning the apprehension of this movement. Silence provides a fruitful background for this as it creates the conditions for listening and reflection.

Freire's concept of dialogue for a critical reading of the word-*world* also supposes learning to listen (1996, 2005). In so doing we do not listen only to the voices of others, but consider a fresh path for our own speech. This is real or genuine dialogue. It is not an agreement, but a difference that makes it possible to go beyond what we already know. In a similar way Buber suggests that in dialogue we experience a covenant by which: "...the law of the point of view no longer holds" (2002: 7). It is a situation in which there is no master, but where the experience of each guides the communication. This is possible only through a disposition to be open and silence plays a key role since it enables such possibilities. Buber (2002) presents three kinds of dialogue: technical, monologue and genuine dialogue. Technical dialogue is carried out only to exchange information, a form which is becoming more frequent in the contemporary world. Picard (1954) also argues that conversation has become a mechanical vehicle transporting "verbal noise" which compromises both the ability of listening and, properly, of speaking. A monologue disguised as dialogue is one: "...in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways" (Buber 2002: 23).

In such a monologue the *Other* does not exist; everything is focused on the one who is speaking and is full of confidence. In a similar way Caranfa says that: "...it seems to me that what dictates our discourse with each other is the ego-centred belief in the truth of our own discourse or discipline, not the silence and the unknown that remains within it" (2004: 211). Hence he argues that silence is at the very heart of learning. Such genuine dialogue, which is becoming rarer, arises from the experience when *I and Thou* face each other; and what they have in common is the experience of a *mystery*. This can happen in both spoken or in silent situations. Buber (2002) describes such experience as a "happening", which is similar to what we experience through music, dance and other forms of art. It is impossible to anticipate completely what is going to happen and it is necessary to have some kind of quietness in order to experience it fully. For example, Ezra Pound points out that: "the medium of drama is people moving about on a stage and using words. That is the words are only part of medium and the gaps between them, or deficiencies in their meaning, can be made up by 'action'." (Pound 1961: 46). This has, clearly, educational implications for the teaching of drama as action rather than simply reading the author's text.

Bondía (2002) also suggests that the excess of information and opinion drains into something meaningless, while the rush of day to day life and the lack of opportunities for silence are the enemies of evaluating experience in education. It is necessary to create a pause in which to think, to listen to the *Other*, to celebrate the encounter and to be patient, fundamental to a meaningful experience. Patience indicates a way of living in time without imposing an artificial rhythm on an event, while maintains receptiveness to the *Other*. As Valéry (1926) says:

...Patience, patience,
Patience dans l'azur!
Chaque atome de silence
Est la chance d'un fruit mûr!²
(Palme)

² English version: "Endurance, endurance,/Endurance in the sky's blue!/every atom of silence,/is a chance of ripened fruit!" Palme (Valéry 1971).

Patience is usually presented as a virtue and also has many possible connections with education, pedagogy and self-knowledge. For instance Wivestad (2013) highlights the influence of patience on the process of becoming better human beings when he says that: “If we live earnestly, passionately and patiently in the struggle with ourselves, we give the next generation a good example to follow, even when we fail” (Wivestad 2013: 69). Another important consideration is the appearance of patience as the behavioural dimension of hope. According to Webb (2013), when emphasising the importance of hope for education, patience is a mode of hoping. He argues that such “pedagogy of hope” is an important aspect of critical theory and its influence on educational thinking. Here we highlight its character of openness and the expectation associated with silence.

Therefore silence is an essential part of the process of reflection, of expression, and of genuine dialogue, keeping a place for the unknown. If words often break the silence with unreflective interpretations, one could say that silence also breaks the noise with germinal conditions for authentic and fresh expression. The excess of meaningless information makes genuine dialogue very difficult because it remains necessary to open space for the *Other* to communicate in turn. What about the wider use of mindfulness as a technique and its connection with silence as a practice? Silence should be not reduced to an instrumentalism; it is a lived condition experienced through encounter. It cannot be used as a means for making us conceive certain ideas and we cannot say in advance what it is: and this is precisely its power. Maybe we could say about silence something similar to what Marcel claims for hope: “...we cannot help asking ourselves how hope can be effective; but the very form of the question takes it for granted that we are unconsciously comparing hope to a technique which operates in a mysterious fashion, let us say magically” (2007: 76). Understanding the presence of silence in dialogue brings together important elements of learning, such as listening to the *Other*, patience, hope and reflection. Yet silence is a phenomenon that is always at our disposal, although one cannot impose silence without it losing integrity and the condition of bearing some mystery. The idea of *mystery* by Marcel (2007) supports the notion of *authentic dialogue* as achieved through reflective encounter as suggested by Martin Buber (Buber 2004; Morgan and Guilherme 2014) and reinforce the suggestion of an ‘aesthetic of silence’ put forwarded by Caranfa (2006). As Picard says: “Silence is a holy nothingness” (Picard 1954: 5), a concept which is again found in Rahner (1999) mentioned earlier.

Conclusion

Education and learning require much more than simple competence in the technical communicative function of language. Learning requires utterance that comes from a dialogical circumstance and it is not the mere exchange of words that guarantees dialogue. It is the dialogical condition that guarantees authentic expression. We should not impose silence for a closed purpose and this requires a necessary openness from educators. We do not argue for silence rather than speech, but for their *organic relationship* which preserves the former’s dignity and generative potency. This is because speech and expression in general need to be nourished through a dialogue in which the speaker should not continue unabated. Silence is thus a pause in the movement from one speech to another, a pause which carries with it the unknown. Some may consider it a risk to ponder the presence of silence in education without a guarantee of meaningful results. We argue that silence is powerful enough to suggest content, while remaining mysterious, valuing our

intercorporeal relationship with the *Other* and with the world. This is a wisdom which requires that we should sometimes remain silent, wait and listen.

Silence can therefore create the conditions, perhaps even a mood, for learning, but it is not a simple teaching mechanism. As a tool silence can become oppressive, as a goal it can become just one more objective to achieve, maybe meaningless. Silence does not only open place for dialogue, it can become the expression of dialogue itself. It engenders possibilities from solitude and contemplation; it can nourish a reflexive posture. But, at the same time it may not fulfil all it promises. So, how is our reflection on silence relevant to the philosophy of education? It challenges the demand for results and reminds us of the importance of learning based on the process of dialogue. This is not totally under control, and if we value expression such uncertainty of outcomes is even necessary. Exploring silence indicates different ways of visiting the world than the constant demand for speech. In doing so, it also restores the power of language. A silence that is not imposed but the genuine fruit of a relationship shows respect for the *Other* and an authentic experience of dialogue.

In any encounter each person needs time for personal reflection to contemplate and absorb its lessons and to renew the dialogue more effectively. An encounter should not be an act of violence which forces the absence of speech or insists on speech without reflection, which prevents other possibilities of meaning emerging. The problem that faces us all is how to live with some mysteries without losing the aim of reaching understanding. But this is, after all, what we should consider as *learning*. Despite the risk it involves, silence gives a chance of listening, of reflection, of the unexpected, of solitude, which, paradoxically, means to be open to the world. In this sense silence is *potency* in itself, which can recover the expressive powers of language by sheltering the *Unknown*.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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