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QUIET IN THE CLASSROOM¹

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Fortune and blessing gather where there is stillness.

--The Chuang-tzu

Most of the courses I teach include a short quiet time at the beginning and close of each class session. I introduced this procedure about 15 years ago in my undergraduate introductory course on transpersonal psychology because stillness was a major theme of the course. Gradually, however, I came to recognize that these quiet times in the classroom also facilitated learning and improved classroom dynamics. I began therefore to use quiet times in a variety of other courses as well--at both graduate and undergraduate levels. In this paper, I will outline the procedure I use and the major effects that occur. Although the procedure is simple, the effects can be remarkable.

Quiet Time Procedure

The procedure I use is deliberately simple, open-ended, and devoid of esotericism. The quiet period is introduced as a way to settle down before and after each class; no reference is made to meditation. Some minimal instructions on posture are given--the class sits upright in a circle on the floor, cross-legged and holding hands. To minimize muscular tension, we rest our joined hands on our knees. The class sizes are relatively small, usually 10-20 students. We sit on cushions on a carpeted floor. In other settings, such as larger classes or rooms with fixed chairs, suitable variations can be devised to accommodate quiet times. We devote about five minutes each to the opening and closing quiet times. A timer can be useful at first, but with practice, the approximate time can be gauged without one. To end the quiet time, I gently squeeze the hand of the person on each side of me; this quickly gets transmitted around the room, signifying the end of the quiet time is near. During the quiet time, we keep our eyes closed. When the quiet period is over, we spend a few moments with our eyes still closed until each of us feels ready to open them.

The quiet times begin with the first class meeting and continue throughout the semester: they become a natural and expected part of each class session. To minimize distractions, any latecomers sit alone quietly, rather than disrupting the class circle. Occasionally, I suggest directing the quiet time towards thoughts of healing or well-being for a member of the class who is ill or in a crisis situation. At times, students are invited to lead a quiet time in their own way; they sometimes choose a specific focal point, such as a musical selection.

Student Responses

Although the quiet times originated in teaching transpersonal psychology, I soon came to realize that the effects facilitated learning and improved classroom

dynamics independently of the subject matter being taught. The beginning and ending quiet times acted as a set of quotation marks, setting off the class from prior and subsequent activities. The quiet times seemed to relax students, to help clear their minds of preoccupations, and to promote a sense of group cohesiveness and a positive learning atmosphere.

To explore my impressions further, for two consecutive semesters I obtained responses from students to the question, "Were the opening and ending quiet times helpful, and, if so, how?" In all, about 120 students were questioned orally or in writing, representing 12 small undergraduate sections of introductory transpersonal psychology and one graduate seminar.

An informal analysis of the students' responses revealed the following major results.

Relaxation, Calmness, and Centering

Quiet times promote relaxation, a sense of letting go, or a feeling of being more at ease. Some students come to class feeling stressed; the quiet periods help to relieve stress and lessen anxiety. In relation to the sense of relaxation, students also report that the quiet times instill calmness, quiet, and peace. Some point out that the quiet times help them to settle or slow themselves down from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives. Other students (a) use the term "centering" to describe what they feel; (b) say it is a time for gathering one's thoughts; or (c) say it is a way of becoming grounded. Some people report that the quiet periods make them feel more energized, more refreshed, or less tired.

Awareness, Focusing, and Clarity

The responses indicate that the quiet times give students a sense of increased awareness and a feeling of being more focused on the present, "the here and now." The beginning times help students to clear their minds, push out prior business, and subdue distractions. The beginning quiet times also help students to focus their attention and concentration during the class.

Readiness for Learning

Many students point out that the beginning quiet time sets up a mood, atmosphere, or frame for the class. A sense of readiness for class is established, preparing both mind and body. Some students mention that the opening quiet time helps them to switch gears from existing concerns to a new subject matter and perspective. Others mention that the quiet time facilitates a more open, receptive, or balanced mind.

Some students directly state that the quiet time helps them to learn because it increases their absorption in the class session and their reflection upon and integration of the class materials and activities.

Group Dynamics

Students also describe how certain positive group dynamics are promoted by the quiet times and thereby help the process of learning. For example, the beginning quiet times are a reassuring way to start the class, and the feeling of closeness that is generated extends to the ensuing class discussions. Students report that the

quiet time brings individuals together as a group, making them feel a sense of cohesiveness, community, or unity with the other members of the class. Some students call attention to feeling one another's energy during the quiet times.

Other Responses

Students also comment that the effects of the ending quiet times can be experienced beyond the classroom. They feel it leaves them more centered, more relaxed (or energized), and more prepared to cope with other classes and the world beyond the campus.

Although some students complained of being distracted by noise from adjacent classrooms, only a handful of students expressed any dissatisfaction with the quiet times per se: the reasons given were that the ending quiet time interrupted or took time away from class activities, the quiet times made them sleepy (in 7:30 a.m. classes), or that they had an aversion to holding hands.

Conclusions

The responses generally confirmed my own favorable impressions over the years about using quiet times in the classroom, but provided more details. The most commonly reported effects were as follows: (a) relaxation, calmness, and centering; (b) enhanced awareness, focusing, and clarity; (c) improved readiness for learning; and (d) feelings of closeness, cohesiveness, community, and unity. Although the students did not say this in the responses, I think the beginning quiet times also help people to speak forth from a less ego-bound and defensive position, and to nurture patience and active listening. Also, the ending quiet times seem to provide the class with a sense of completion. Finally, the quiet times have also been helpful in centering my own awareness.

Much of what the students generally say is captured in the following response by one student:

"It [the quiet time] creates a positive environment for the coming class participation. I use it as a time for focusing on me. I also use it as a time to relax and think. I leave the problems that are not beneficial to the class outside once we do our starting meditation. It also brings the class closer to being one by becoming more aware of each other. I think holding hands is especially symbolic and helpful. The closing meditation helps me to reflect on what has happened in the class and also to prepare for the coming day."

The student responses are not only positive, but also suggest that quiet times would be a useful adjunct to classroom learning in other subjects and disciplines.

Two students explicitly voiced this idea:

- (1) I found it [the quiet time] very helpful and would incorporate it into all my classes if it were possible.
- (2) I wish meditation were in all my classes just to relieve some of the stress and tension from each class.

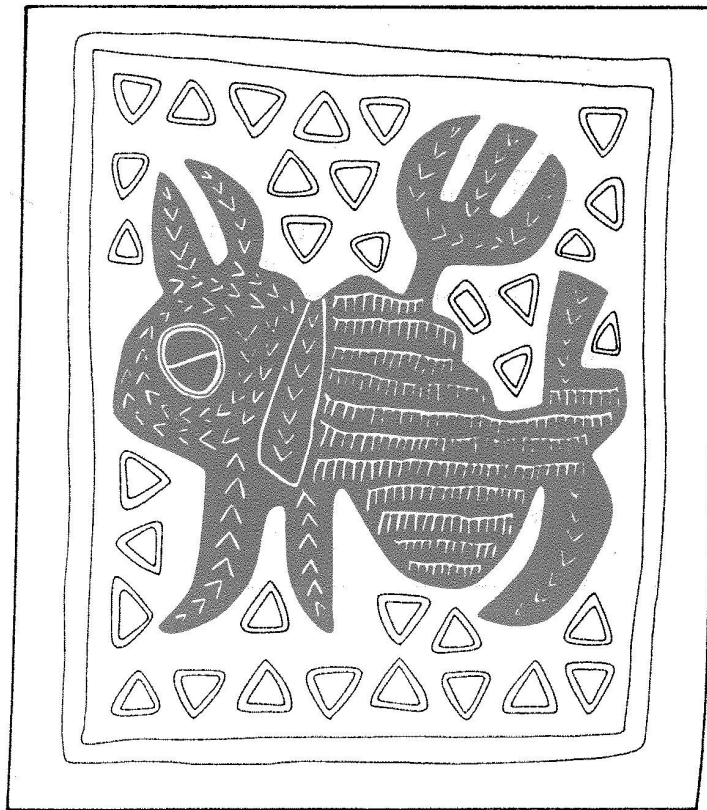
The range and depth of positive effects prompted by a simple, short quiet time in

the classroom continually impress me. I hope that other teachers will be encouraged to try quiet times in their classrooms as well. I would also encourage experimenting with variations and soliciting suggestions from students. A recent compilation of resources about the psychology of silence is now available (Shapiro, 1990) for those seeking more information on the subject.

Quiet times in the classroom not only benefit learning, but also serve to acknowledge the silent ground from which language and cognition emerge.

Bibliography

- Shapiro, S. I. (1990). The reach of silence.
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