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Jeffery Skoblow

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# **"Are We Allowed to Talk?"**

## **A Classroom Experiment**

by  
Jeffrey Skoblow

I walked into class--a two hour session of freshman composition with 15 students, all minority students and all among UCLA's most underprepared writers<sup>1</sup>--and when everyone had composed themselves in silence I wrote on the board, in large letters: NO TALKING. I drew a thick box around the message and looked back at my students, at each student, nodding with a silent question on my face as to say Yes? Each nodded back to me--Yes--some quickly and some, puzzled, pausing, slowly, and we were under way.

Although I was not planning it at the time, I was to remain silent for most or all of each session roughly two out of three class meetings for the remaining six weeks of the term. But this first trial differed from subsequent silent classes in that it would be the only time I demanded my students' silence as well as my own. This was in part due to the fact that, at first, I did not quite know what I was up to; my aim was to focus attention on the general status of speech in the classroom, and I was not yet thinking specifically of the ways in which my own speech was accorded a special value.

The class meeting just prior to this had been typical enough: we had been reading "Oedipus the King," our discussion propelled by questions I asked and lines of inquiry I was able to solicit, with three or four students actively engaged, half of the rest generally attentive and the other half, for the most part, otherwise preoccupied. My students recognized that the immediate motive for my peculiar command was frustration with this state of affairs, and that, as several pointed out to me later, it was not without a punitive dimension: something along the lines of OK, you don't appreciate the opportunity to speak, you lose it. More simply, quite blindly, I was tired of that time-worn teacherly business, the pulling of teeth, and I wanted to try something, of theatrical value if nothing else, to break the spell at least for a moment.

So I wrote on the board: I WOULD LIKE TO PUT OEDIPUS ASIDE FOR THE MOMENT-- and turned around for signs of assent, which I was enthusiastically given. I erased that sentence and wrote: I WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU A SERIOUS QUESTION-- again pausing for eye contact--and continued: WHAT DO YOU HAVE POWER OVER? I extended my hand like a blank sheet of paper, wrote upon it with a phantom pen in my other hand, pointed to someone's notebook on the table before her, and to my question on the board. Someone asked if I wanted them to write, and I

slammed my hand on the table, put a finger to my lips, pointed to the words NO TALKING, then back to my question--and everyone began writing a response.

I had arrived at this question because, although I did not yet have the graphic evidence of my own power's inhibiting effect that I was to find in the ensuing weeks, I perceived my students' silence, and their grudging or tentative efforts at speech, as springing from their understanding of their own powerlessness--an understanding I struggled to amend even as it seemed to me altogether well founded. A student's experience is routinely one of passivity, of the power to receive or, when called upon, to reproduce, but rarely to generate the language of mutual concern. This seems to me always worth recalling, since students' work is always mediated in part by the history of that experience. My students' responses fell more or less into three categories, and did not inspire hope except with regard to their honesty. Their powers, in their own view, extended to friends and siblings, to mundane affairs like what to wear, how to decorate their rooms, and when to brush their teeth, and to their own thoughts and dreams, which remained unspecified; and in the cases of clothing and thought, several noted, their power--which they uniformly interpreted as freedom--was hedged by the constraints of peer pressure and other environmental conditioning. These responses were read aloud. When they had written for ten minutes or so, I drew their attention with a knock on the board, pointed to one student and gestured silently for her--with my hand opening and closing at my mouth--to read her piece. She pointed to my interdiction--NO TALKING--on the board, so I added a comma and the words JUST READING, and the procedure was set. Students could voice themselves only in reading aloud what they had written. I remained silent, restricting myself to paraphrases and yes-or-no questions written on the board.

An undergraduate tutor who worked regularly with the students on an individual basis was in class that day, and he said his piece as well, following the rules of the game. He reported that as a white, male member of the middle class he was accorded a certain power--interpersonal, academic, economic--which he resented as much as he appreciated, feeling that in part it was based in, and sustained, a system of injustice. Writing on the board, I asked everyone to write again, this time in response to this last bit of testimony, and everyone began to do so.

It was here that a distinctive feature of the silent class first became apparent. Normally, when I would ask students to write something in class (as I would do most days), upon completing it they would affect a detached, even secretive air, sometimes even covering up their page of prose with a notebook or other sheet of paper. When I would ask if anyone would like to read what they'd written they would studiously avoid eye contact, and when I called on someone specifically he or she would groan in grudging compliance, as if alone the object of persecution. (Most teachers, I think, will recognize the behavior I am describing.) No amount of explanation or experience with the highly improvisational, fail-safe nature of such exercises could convince them that the risk was worth taking. They would insist that they weren't sure they'd gotten it right, or had done what I wanted, no matter how open-ended the assignment, and in spite of the fact that their work in class was never criticized in such terms, but always treated as a useful provocation to further discussion, a contribution, an impromptu conversational gesture. In the silent class, however, immediately their characteristic attitude was different.



First one student, then another, and then another called me over to them--silently, that is--to read what they were writing. I would read it and, borrowing the student's pen and writing on the same page, make a comment, adding a question or suggestion for further development. Needless to say, these comments had a very different status from the marginal notes one makes on papers students submit for judgment--for one thing, these were solicited. Nor did they seem like verbal responses given in the course of discussion--there was nothing of the corrective or approving about them, or at least, what was corrective or approving about them seemed to have a different function. I point this out not to distinguish the comments I was making--which were very much the kinds of comments my students were used to hearing from me--but to indicate the unusual power of the form and setting in which they were made. The students would read along as I wrote, nodding as they caught my drift and then shooing me away--two of them even grabbed the pen back out of my hand--to get on with their work.

The class carried on in this way for twenty minutes or so. About half of the students called me over at some point, a few of them more than once, each time writing further once I'd left. Then we began another round of reading aloud--again punctuated by my paraphrases and yes-or-no questions on the board--which took us roughly to the halfway point in the day's session. This round generated another, this time writing in response to a question about one student's reference to education as a source of power, a redemption of powerlessness. When these pieces were then read aloud, the class took another unexpected turn, and in effect took itself right out of my hands.

Instead of waiting for me to ask the right question, one student got up by herself and approached the board. One of her classmates had made a generalization about "immigrants" not appreciating the value of education and had used the word "they" in doing so, and this, it turned out, bothered her on several counts. She wrote on the board: "What do you mean immigrants? Who is 'they'?" This young woman was black, native to Los Angeles, and her classmate from El Salvador, having moved here as a child. She was bothered, as the dialogue in chalk which followed made clear, by her classmate's dissociation of herself from "them," by the fact that, as she saw it, immigrants were not the only people who had problems with education, and further, that not all immigrants did have such problems--as the classmate herself demonstrated.

The classmate went up to the board and wrote her first response, refining her point and getting herself into deeper trouble, in terms of the argument--which, however, and quite uncharacteristically, did not seem to faze her in the least. She added the words "ignorant" and "lazy" to her formulation, trying to specify the particular kinds of immigrants she had in mind, which only resulted--much to my satisfaction--in another challenge from the first student: why did she assume that immigrants were ignorant and lazy? and what made them that way? This was, of course, the kind of investigative procedure I had myself often labored to lead them through, with varying degrees of success: questioning a generalization, and pushing the specifics for further questions, to confirm or undermine, and ultimately reshape the thought.

I had moved to the back of the classroom, out of the way. Two students at the board shared the one eraser and exchanged their questions and answers in silence. Soon enough--after three or four exchanges--another student raised his hand, looking my way. I motioned him to the board and he took up chalk and joined in the debate on the side of the first questioner. Now things began to



move rather quickly, and the event is difficult to describe. A fourth student got up, took chalk, and defended her friend from the attacks of the two others, attacking *them* not for the points they made, but for not letting her friend make *hers*--which was how she interpreted the dynamic between them--the argument turning meta-argument. She sat back down but the others were unmoved and continued back and forth. A fifth student got up to question an assumption of one of the questioners. Another rose to make a point tangentially related to someone else's. With four or five students at the board the pace accelerated, and they began to write without first reading what anybody was saying, even erasing something before anyone *could* read it in order to make room for their own words. The woman whose remarks touched it all off continued the attempt to clarify herself, her defender intermittently returned to hold the others off on her behalf, the original questioners pressed their questions, and others joined in, pertinently or not so clearly so. Still others engaged me in the debate, writing in their notebooks. The last half hour of the class was occupied in this manner --again, all of this in total silence--and it ended with six or seven people at the board writing furiously and struggling for that eraser.

Clearly the discussion had gone out of control, had become an orgy of expulsion going nowhere in particular. But clearly, too, something extraordinary was taking place, and whatever impulse I may have had to check its progress was easily stifled. When I finally did stop it--with a couple of minutes to go, I said simply: "Stop!"--and I was greeted with gasps of mock outrage, shouts of "No! No!", and laughter. I assigned them to read "Oedipus at Colonus" for the following week and dismissed the class. Free now to talk, several students--two separate groups of three or four--remained in the room for a moment, again quite uncharacteristically, to carry on their discussion. End of experimental episode #1.

What did all this mean? I don't know that I've adequately conveyed the unusual nature of the experience; one would need, perhaps, to have met regularly with the utter reluctance of this group of students to take charge of their activity in order to appreciate what was going on. The most striking impression was of the very lively way in which everyone was paying attention, right from the start of the class that day. It seems paradoxical to say, but everyone was *listening*. Half of the class, twice the usual number, actively took part, and the other half stayed right with them, heads up, eyes steady, following the proceedings closely. It was this latter group that was really the more remarkable to observe; it is not entirely uncommon to excite relatively widespread participation, but for the whole class, without exception, to be so alert, their presence so purposeful, was almost uncanny.

This phenomenon had something to do with the novelty of the situation, one might think, but it was to remain a consistent feature of the silent class throughout the term. In a sense, what I had taken away from my students--with the prohibition against speech--was not their *speech* but a certain kind of silence. To a certain extent, that is, the voice of the teacher is both license and provocation to the students to shut down whole portions--or at least half portions--of their sensory apparatus. No matter what else it says, and even if it explicitly contradicts this message, that voice always says: I am in charge, and you'd best listen. But since this is not a normal conversation, and since students' motives for engaging the challenge are often unsure at best, rooted in compulsory passivity, the kind of listening they do often has a particular cast to it. Call it listening with half an ear, the kind of attention children know



how to give their parents, or for that matter, parents know how to give their children. In fact, everyone who engages in a relationship defined by the play of disproportionate power knows this mode of attention: listening for what might count, specifically for what might hurt or help. Students monitor the flow of language, on the lookout for assignments and other demands, or for a joke perhaps worth hearing. They catch what they have to. When the teacher does not speak, of course, it is impossible to listen in this way. The students are then more readily induced--free and forced--to keep their eyes open. The difference is that between faces screening for what might be usable, and faces open to absorb whatever there is to take in, constructing the usable by a more inward process.

Students know silence to be a powerful tool. Their entire experience as students has been shaped by it. Silence is the site of attention, the first lesson they learn and the one most often repeated. Even their own speech, and their own writing, is customarily conceived in response to what they have--in silence--heard or read, as a way to show how well or poorly they have learned to listen. And listening is so closely associated with learning that we often fail to distinguish between the terms at all. Silence, then--or at least a certain kind of silence--is, first, productive. If you can't be silent you can't listen, and if you can't listen well you won't learn much.

Students in fact are so submerged in silence that in most cases they will break it only when invited or commanded to do so. Raising their hands to raise unsolicited issues is an exception to the rule, but even this possibility operates within fairly strict limits. Silence can be violated with unhappy consequences. In extreme cases even expulsion from school is a possibility, although by the time someone reaches college this is not very likely: by that point surely the lesson has been learned. But there are various lesser forms of castigation, and no student is ever punished--however he may suffer--for being silent. Even when students are asked to speak, the act is not without its risks: correction by teachers, the silent ridicule of classmates, the revelation of one's own confusion--all the pitfalls of saying "the wrong thing." So silence becomes a defensive tool too. Teachers are familiar with this mode of their students' silence, and regard it rightly as a kind of willful disengagement, even if the motives behind it are not always clearly understood.

That my students had come out of hiding was the clearest result of this first experimental session. The rules of the game, it seemed, had changed. And this seemed to be clear to them as well. The next time we met I asked them what they had made of the experience. We held class in conventional fashion, speaking and writing on the subject of silence in general and the previous class in particular, and pretty much reverted to form: three or four students took the lead, the rest split between active attention and varying degrees of withdrawal. They understood that I had forbidden speech out of frustration with their refusal to speak, and that I wanted to encourage their participation. One student, asked why she didn't speak up more often under normal circumstances, pointed out that she regarded the classroom, naturally, as mine, not hers. This was the same young woman who had kicked the silent class into high gear by challenging her classmate's remark about immigrants. Another particularly shy student, who rarely spoke even when called upon, offered, when asked, that the purpose of the silent class had been to teach them how to be good listeners. I agreed with her, and when I pointed out that this was a rather extraordinary notion, as there had been nothing to listen *to* that day, she added that it was a matter of



paying attention--not knowing what was going to happen next, and having no way to monitor what might.

I still was not certain that this experiment could be applied to more substantive material, but given its apparent success, I was determined to try. I decided, too, simply to remain silent myself without requiring everyone else to do so, just to see what difference that made. So at our next meeting, when they were to have read "Oedipus at Colonus," I wrote on the board: ASK A QUESTION ABOUT OEDIPUS AT COLONUS--and gestured in pantomime for them to write it in their notebooks. After an expectant pause, one student raised his hand and asked in a whisper: "Are we allowed to talk?" I shrugged to indicate 'Sure, go ahead,' and he said: "What kind of question, any question?" I wrote on the board: ANY QUESTION. A TOUGH QUESTION. YOUR BEST QUESTION. A QUESTION YOU'RE NOT SURE HOW TO ANSWER. And we were under way once more.

This session would become the model for much of what was to follow. As they wrote their questions I distributed chalk to everyone in the room, and as they finished writing I pointed to each of them and jerked my thumb to the board, meaning: Put it up there. Gradually everyone did so. Those among the last to get up to the board paused in their efforts to frame a question in order to read what the first ones were writing, and several of the first to write returned to the board to revise their questions, or to add further questions, when they saw what the others had asked. This process took fifteen or twenty minutes to complete. Some lingered at the board to read what was being written there, others returned to their seats, and when all the questions were up we paused to take them in. This was, I must say, a most organic moment; there was no need for me to suggest the procedural logic of doing so. All I had to do, for those students at one end of the room who had trouble making out what was written at the other end of the board, and who leaned from their seats straining to see it, was to point to the board and back at them with a question on my face, and motion for them to leave their seats to come to where they could see more clearly.

As it turned out, the questions this first time were excellent, though in subsequent such classes they were not always so comprehensive or pointed. They ranged over the whole play: all of the characters, the major plot points, the function of the Chorus, the motives of the playwright, theme, ancient social context, and modern reader response. Some of them sought to clarify ambiguous events while others posed problems open to no solution but provocative of further questions. They filled the board, and provided at once an overview of the discussion ahead and a tantalizing tangle of specifics whose outcome, for the moment, was wholly mysterious. I wrote on the board GOOD QUESTIONS, erased that feedback immediately, and stepped back once again for us all to consider them further.

The silent classes were full of pauses like this. The quality of such moments differed from that of pauses during a normal class in which the teacher speaks, when students generally wait for him to fill the silence. Here, more often than not, one of the students would fill the silence, referring back to an earlier point in the discussion or taking us forward with the material more immediately at hand, often in ways that surprised me. It's not that I wouldn't expect it of them, but simply that I myself could not have predicted or actively solicited certain of their lines of inquiry, or connections they made, which had occasion to arise here precisely because I was not predicting, soliciting, or



calculating the progress of the discussion in any way. Silent, whatever control I could exert over the proceedings did not extend to what could be said, or when it could be brought up. Sometimes I did put a question on hold--writing something on the board to that effect, or even storing the question itself there for all to keep in mind--but this was more like directing traffic than setting an agenda. Sometimes, too, it was I who filled the gap, who broke the pause, but here again the difference was palpable: I wasn't necessarily expected to do so, and my efforts had more of a sense of contribution to them than of definition.

This distinction had a broader application as well. I noticed over the course of the following weeks that my interventions during discussion were received in an unfamiliar manner. By interventions I mean comments beyond mere paraphrase or question: interpretations of my own, for instance, or connections between points raised by different students, anything, that is, that did not merely aim at facilitating *their* discussion, but that drew on my own agenda. Such comments, I have found, generally run the risk of inhibiting discussion, as if to say it were not in fact a discussion but a course already mapped, as if analysis were a matter of footsteps to be followed and not a mode of exploration. As a result I am often reluctant to make such moves, or at least, since they seem quite unavoidable and not altogether undesirable, I am often dissatisfied with their effects. In the silent class, however, I found myself maneuvering in this way with ease, and apparently without producing inhibition or exerting definitive control over the discussion. My remarks in chalk on the board were taken up as in a conversation, which is to say they were challenged, modified, developed, or sustained. In short, they were not received without inspection and critical response. This made for a kind of freedom for me, and it was somewhat puzzling. Why should this be so?

I suspect that when a teacher speaks, as one normally does, to a certain extent it does not appear to be direct speech but a kind of quotation. Robert Pirsig<sup>2</sup> tells an instructive story about his paralysis on the first day of a class, when he became aware that he was not so much talking to his students as trying to recall the kinds of things teachers might say, as if speaking, in the inert presence of his audience, to an image of himself. Students certainly feel a similar kind of paralysis, or a continuously renewed instantaneous amnesia. It is sometimes called daydreaming but is even manifest at times in compulsive note-taking, which can function as a way of not listening as well. The language they are met with, after all, is clearly not quite directed to them: it predates them, it belongs to a syllabus and to lessons planned in advance, repeated often term after term. Teachers' language marks the fact that courses are, to a certain extent inescapably, matters of the teacher's calculation.

But in a silent class this is impossible, or at least seemed to be regarded as a matter of no account. Although I was still structuring the discussion--drawing attention to this or that question on the board or asking my own--my task was now rigorously dependent on the material students provided, forced to wait upon the latter's unfolding. My language was necessarily a response, informed perhaps by past experience but by definition not subject to precalculation. This gave it a special status as direct speech--me to you, right now--which extended even to my most overtly teacherly utterances. Since I had obviously not planned the class beyond a point to start from, and since my power to determine its development was severely limited, I was regarded in fact as a member of the class, on equalized if not equal footing with everyone else. My contributions to discussion became then just that--contributions, not tokens of



determination. They could be valued to the extent that they aided the discussion under way, and challenged, sometimes heatedly, when they did not.

An example from later in the term illustrates the point graphically. During the final week we spent some time attempting to summarize our work on Sophocles. Earlier in the term, in one of our efforts (I should say at that point, one of *my* efforts) to relate the ancient material to contemporary concerns, I had brought into class some passages from Freud on the Oedipus complex, and so as part of the summary I included--silently, in chalk--the term "unconscious compulsion." This provoked immediate and strenuous objections, leading to a discussion of some fifteen minutes which, under normal circumstances, might have been considered digressive, but which in this context was clearly work of a most productive kind. My students insisted on seeing Oedipus' situation as accidental, neither compelled nor related in any way to the question of how aware he might have been of the forces driving his life. And in the end I was forced to withdraw my Freudian gambit, and forced, too, to see that my effort to convince them, though fruitless, was not wasted at all. It was simply a matter of genuine dialogue--inefficient, to be sure, and lamentable if what one has in mind is controlling what gets covered, but plainly salutary if what one has in mind is fostering critical thought and intellectual self-reliance. Other classes late in the term displayed the same pattern: discussions side-tracked by hair-splitting and (from my point of view) pointless distinctions and tangential quarrels. I would point out this problem when it arose, but I could not govern it; had I allowed myself to speak I might have been able to solve it more readily, but it seemed a problem worth having, more useful even--for the sake of the struggle--than a solution.

Needless to say, this kind of unruliness, of contestatory energy, is precisely what one hardly expects under normal circumstances. In fact, during one class early in the term, before the experiment in silence began, we addressed the issue explicitly. I had paraphrased a student's comment on the board, asking for and receiving confirmation that I had understood him properly, when the tutor pointed out that in fact I had not--and got up to the board to revise my notation. The student conceded that this revision was closer to the mark, so I urged everyone not to let me get away with mangling their remarks in this manner in the future, but to correct me when I did not fairly represent what they were trying to say. But this sort of response is easier demanded than provided--under normal circumstances--just another instance of not giving the teacher what he wants. In the silent class it was a fact of life.

The students' authority is obviously heightened under these conditions, but I would not say that the teacher's is diminished, only changed. Think of it: when a teacher speaks he asks for assent, either explicitly ("You see? Right? Yeah?") or implicitly, by the relative sophistication of his discourse or the confidence granted by expertise and institutional power. A teacher is by the very nature of the job a persuasive figure, and to contend against such a presence is, for students, difficult indeed. When a teacher is silent, however, his contribution to class is not something one submits to or overcomes. If he is thoughtful what he brings to class is no less authoritative--that is, no less informed by wisdom, experience, and so on--but merely less totalitarian. If anything, his true authority, the self-evident value of what he has to offer, can only be heightened, operating as it were within a free market economy.



And so we proceeded from the students' questions, and worked our way through "Oedipus at Colonus." We clarified uncertainties and deepened mysteries. The initiative to move from one question to the next came from me or from one of the students, and often enough from the progress of the discussion itself, a matter of "That leads us to this question" rather than "OK, what about this one?" As each question or sequence of questions was dealt with, I erased it before moving on to the next. This was not to indicate, and as the ongoing discussion made clear, was not taken to indicate, that the questions were settled in any absolute sense, but it provided a powerfully graphic sense that our discussion was indeed getting somewhere. At the end of the session we had returned the board to blankness, a paradoxical emblem of all we had accomplished.

Our remaining silent classes followed this same pattern, as we worked through Sophocles' *Theban Trilogy* and went on to other readings. At our first encounter with any material I would ask, in silence, for questions which would provide our initial analysis. But follow-up classes would work variations on this format. In the class following our first discussion of "Oedipus at Colonus," for instance, I wrote on the board: WHO IS OEDIPUS AT COLONUS? WRITE A CHARACTER SKETCH. When several of these were read aloud, questions generated, and comparisons and contrasts pursued, I wrote: WHO IS OEDIPUS THE KING? WRITE ANOTHER CHARACTER SKETCH. The responses here led to a rich insight, and led me--as I would be led in almost every silent class, but never more than once or twice per session--to break silence. I said something to the effect that: "This is remarkable. You all agree that Oedipus the King is an arrogant and manipulative man who gets what he deserves, but that Oedipus at Colonus is an innocent victim badly treated by everyone around him. And at the same time you all agree that he is the same man in both plays, that nothing in him has changed. How do we get from suspicion and hostility to sympathy and forgiveness?" The question came in groping fashion, but as soon as it was before us it struck me as a very useful formulation, and I asked everyone to write a response to it for our next meeting.

I began the next day by putting the question up on the board, adding THAT IS THE QUESTION, and then erasing it. Then I asked (in silence) that everyone write an epitaph for Oedipus, and had them put those up on the board. We moved through them asking of each one if it showed suspicion and hostility or sympathy and forgiveness, and discovered by the end of the day that what had changed from one play to the next was not in the plays but in us, as readers, and that what made the difference was, as one student put it, "understanding." This, of course, is a fundamental insight of classical tragedy, that to understand a man fully is to forgive even his darkest sin, and for the students to arrive at it themselves in the space of three class sessions, starting from their own questions, was a lesson more powerful than any lecture could deliver. And I should add in passing that nobody any longer was eager to put Oedipus aside for the moment; he was their Oedipus after all, not mine.

\* \* \* \* \*

In one of his songs of bitter recrimination called "Stop Talking," the great blues singer John Lee Hooker has a wonderful line. His general complaint is that his girlfriend never means what she says, and at one point he tells her: "Shut up your mouth, baby, and *talk*." I would offer this, without facetiousness, as a model of the dynamic between teachers and students. Students are required to keep quiet and somehow, at the same time, to produce meaning. It would seem to



be a virtually impossible situation. But for teachers, as my experiment with silence demonstrates, the injunction makes absolute sense. It was precisely by keeping quiet that I was able to produce meaning of a kind that mattered most.

I am not primarily interested here in proposing silence as a method--still less as dogma--although I would urge any teacher so inclined to attempt it. I am hoping, rather, that my findings will encourage other teachers to consider all the countless ways in which our received pedagogy thwarts a certain kind of learning, the kind of learning--self-directed, open-ended--presumably at the heart of our own passions for the work that engages us. The issue is particularly relevant in the context of a compulsory freshman curriculum, where questions of motivation tend to be foregrounded, where the authority of students, that object of our attention, is felt to be most dubious. Anything that can be done to foster that authority--not somewhere down the line, assuming its absence at the start, but immediately, in their formative encounter with the university--deserves our deepest consideration.

I imagine that one objection to what I have been describing would be that it does not prepare students in any direct way for the more prescriptive demands that will be made of them in their subsequent classes. No composition class in isolation can effect an escape from the prescriptive ethos that dominates schooling as a whole, and there is perhaps something faintly, or distinctly, utopian about all this. So I should confess that I am not directly interested at all, as a teacher, in training students to master the modes of academic discourse, perhaps the most commonly cited course goal for freshman composition classes. If it turns out to be worth their while to do so, they will have ample opportunity to focus on such matters as they go along, and--more important--a foundation from which to launch the effort. It is the foundation that concerns me--I am interested in helping students experience their own language, both spoken and written, as an autopedagogical tool operating in the context of self-determination and critical inquiry. My own silence has taught me more strikingly than anything yet that this is a realistic goal, and most rewarding for all concerned.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>My work here is indebted primarily to my students in the Freshman Preparatory Program at UCLA, upon whose good will and adventurousness my silent method depended. The class tutors, Bob Orr and Laura Rochette, were also indispensable in helping me understand what was going on as it unfolded over the course of the term. For general background, the texts that have most importantly shaped my sense of the issues involved are Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970) and *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation* (Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey, 1985); Robert Mackie, ed., *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire* (New York: Continuum, 1980); Caleb Gattegno, *What We Owe Children: The Subordination of Teaching to Learning* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970) and *The Universe of Babies: In the beginning there were no words* (New York: Educational Solutions, 1973); Marie Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (New York: Delta, 1967); Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Henry A. Giroux, "Radical Pedagogy and the Politics of Student Voice," *Interchange* 17 (1986) pp. 48-69; and Michelle Fine, "Silencing in Public Schools," *Language Arts* 64 (1987) pp. 157-174.