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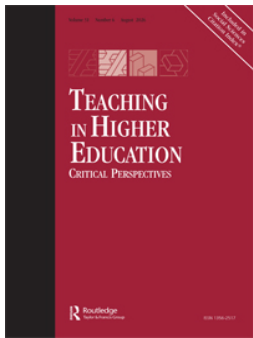
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Teaching in Higher Education

Critical Perspectives

ISSN: 1356-2517 (Print) 1470-1294 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cthe20

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To cite this article: Julia Hope (08 Sep 2026): Beyond participation: reimagining silence as pedagogical presence in the university seminar, Teaching in Higher Education, DOI: [10.1080/13562517.2026.2728976](https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2026.2728976)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2026.2728976>



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Published online: 08 Sep 2026.



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Beyond participation: reimagining silence as pedagogical presence in the university seminar

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ABSTRACT

Silence in higher education seminars is frequently interpreted through deficit frames, particularly within classroom cultures that privilege rapid, confident speech as a marker of participation. This article examines silence as a form of pedagogical presence and explores the quieter ways students engage in seminar learning. Drawing on reflective-practitioner inquiry, the study analyses learning journals, observational field notes, and focus group discussions to examine how students use silence within seminar learning. Reflexive thematic analysis informed the development of the Seven Dimensions of Silent Presence, a framework for understanding quieter forms of participation in seminar learning. The findings suggest that silence often signals active engagement rather than withdrawal, challenging speech-centred assumptions equating participation with verbal fluency. The framework offers a way to recognise quieter forms of participation and support more inclusive seminar pedagogy in higher education.

Sự im lặng trong các buổi seminar trong giáo dục đại học thường được diễn giải dưới góc nhìn như một khiếm khuyết, đặc biệt trong những lớp học mà việc phát biểu nhanh chóng và tự tin được coi là chỉ dấu của việc tham gia tích cực trên lớp. Bài viết này xem xét sự im lặng như một hình thức hiện diện sư phạm và khám phá những cách thức trầm lặng hơn mà sinh viên dùng để tham gia học trong các buổi seminar. Dựa trên phương pháp nghiên cứu phản tư-thực hành, nghiên cứu này phân tích nhật ký học tập, ghi chép quan sát thực địa và các cuộc thảo luận nhóm tập trung, nhằm tìm hiểu cách sinh viên sử dụng sự im lặng trong khi tham dự các buổi seminar. Sử dụng phương pháp phản tư chủ đề phản tư, tác giả xây dựng 'Bảy phương diện của sự hiện diện trầm lặng' – một khung lý thuyết giúp lý giải các hình thức tham gia ít thể hiện bằng lời trong hoạt động học tập các buổi seminar. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sự im lặng thường phản ánh sự tham gia chủ động hơn là sự thu mình hay không tham gia, qua đó nghiên cứu này thách thức những giả định rằng sự tham gia học tập được biểu hiện qua khả năng diễn đạt lưu loát bằng lời. Khung lý thuyết này cung cấp cách thức để nhận diện những hình thức tham gia trầm lặng hơn và hỗ trợ việc xây dựng

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 November 2025

Accepted 27 August 2026

KEYWORDS

Silent presence; student participation; seminar pedagogy; intersectionality; reflective practitioner research

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phương pháp giảng dạy seminar tôn trọng và khuyến khích sự tham gia đa dạng của sinh viên trong giáo dục đại học.

Introduction

In many discussion-based undergraduate seminars in UK higher education, participation is often associated with verbal fluency, confidence, and the ability to respond quickly in group discussions. Within these seminar contexts, students who participate more quietly may be interpreted as disengaged, uncertain, or academically lacking, despite research suggesting that learning also occurs through reflective, embodied, and less visible forms of engagement. While active participation remains central to seminar pedagogy, dominant understandings of participation often privilege rapid verbal contribution over quieter forms of engagement.

This article explores silence as a form of pedagogical presence rather than simply an absence of engagement. While higher-education seminar pedagogy frequently promotes discussion as evidence of participation, less attention has been paid to how engagement is recognised when students participate through listening, reflection, emotional regulation, or embodied attentiveness. The paper argues that prevailing participation frameworks risk overlooking important forms of learning when engagement is interpreted primarily as speech. Drawing on reflective-practitioner inquiry (Schön 1983; Brookfield 1995), the study examines how students use silence for thinking, attentiveness, and participation, and considers the implications for more inclusive understandings of seminar pedagogy.

This study is situated within first-year undergraduate seminars at a UK widening-participation university. The research emerged from reflective-practitioner inquiry conducted by the seminar lecturer, who sought to understand how students participate in ways that may not be immediately visible within speech-centred pedagogical cultures. The discussion-based format of Social Science and Education seminars was particularly relevant, as participation in these disciplines is often closely associated with verbal discussion and debate. These disciplines place particular emphasis on discussion, interpretation, and collaborative meaning-making, making them productive contexts for examining how participation becomes associated with speech and how quieter forms of engagement may be overlooked.

Although grounded within a specific institutional context, the study raises broader questions about how participation is recognised and interpreted within higher education pedagogy.

Within this context, the study addresses the following questions:

- (1) How do students experience and use silence within first-year undergraduate seminars?
- (2) What different functions does silence appear to serve within seminar learning?
- (3) How might these insights inform a framework for recognising quieter forms of participation within higher education pedagogy?

Literature review

Silence as pedagogical meaning-making

In higher education, silence is often interpreted as disengagement, uncertainty, or a lack of preparation. Such interpretations arise from speech-centric pedagogical norms that

equate learning with verbal fluency, speed, and confidence. This narrow framing obscures the ways students actively participate through quieter modes of presence. Scholars have long argued that silence is socially and rhetorically meaningful, operating as a communicative resource rather than a void (Jaworski 1993; Glenn 2004). Empirical work in higher education further shows that classroom participation is shaped by the classroom's social organisation, including interaction norms, peer relations, confidence, and students' perceptions of the learning environment (Fassinger 1995; Weaver and Qi 2005). Silence may therefore reflect how students read and negotiate the conditions of participation as much as any absence of engagement.

Research in educational settings highlights that silence can support deeper reasoning, reflective thought, and emotional regulation. Rowe's (1974, 1986) work on wait-time demonstrates that extended pauses can foster more complex thinking and allow students greater time for reflection before contributing. In higher education, Remedios et al. (2008) found that in small-group collaborative learning, students who spoke minimally could still be learning actively. That silence arose from interacting personal, contextual, and cultural constraints. Nakane (2006), Bao and Nguyen (2020) likewise show that silence can form part of students' communicative and learning repertoires, including in multilingual and intercultural settings. These studies challenge simplistic assumptions that silence signifies deficiency or passivity.

Recent higher-education research extends this perspective. Wang et al. (2022) conceptualise silence as a social practice in intercultural classrooms at a UK university, showing how it is entangled with agency, power, and the positioning of L2 international students. Briffett-Aktaş and Ying (2025), writing in *Teaching in Higher Education*, similarly challenge student-voice models that equate voice with active verbal participation and argue for recognising silence-as-voice. Together, this work suggests that quiet forms of engagement require interpretation rather than automatic correction. However, silence is still frequently interpreted through deficit-oriented assumptions that position quietness in relation to what is absent rather than what may be occurring within seminar interaction.

Silence, power and intersectional positioning

Silence is shaped by social power. Intersectional theorists such as Crenshaw (1991), Ahmed (2012), and Reay (2004) have shown that race, class, gender, and linguistic identity can profoundly affect how students navigate and inhabit classroom spaces. For students positioned at marginal intersections, silence may operate as protection, a refusal to expose oneself to stereotyping, or a response to the emotional labour required to participate in environments where one's legitimacy is questioned. In such contexts, silence is not a deficit but a carefully managed strategy for maintaining dignity and safety.

Foucault's (1978) account of power illuminates how institutional norms structure expectations around participation. Seminar cultures that reward speed, fluency, and assertive debate can reproduce privilege by aligning with dominant communicative styles. Students who do not conform to these norms may be perceived as disengaged, regardless of their level of internal participation. Macfarlane (2015) describes 'student performativity' in higher education as the growing expectation that learning should be made publicly observable through attendance, class participation, and group activity. This helps explain how apparently neutral expectations of visible contribution can privilege students already comfortable performing engagement.

Cultural and linguistic factors intensify these dynamics. Nakane (2006) shows that silence may signal respect, disagreement, or critical reflection depending on cultural norms, yet Western communicative expectations often misread these meanings. Bao and Nguyen (2020) similarly emphasise that silence in multilingual classrooms can indicate deep processing, cautious precision, or preparation for verbal participation. How silence is interpreted can either affirm students' identities or contribute to experiences of marginalisation.

Embodied and affective dimensions of quiet presence

Phenomenological and affective perspectives provide important insights into the embodied nature of silent participation. Merleau-Ponty (2002) foregrounds perception as a bodily process. Within this view, silence becomes a form of embodied orientation rather than a lack of speech. Leaning forward, adjusting posture, or holding stillness can signal attentiveness and engagement, even without verbal participation.

Affective scholarship further clarifies the emotional labour woven into silent presence. Gross (1998) demonstrates that emotion regulation shapes whether and how individuals choose to speak, particularly in contexts where vulnerability is heightened. Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory suggests that quietness may support cognitive expansion, enabling students to absorb, synthesise, and integrate complex material. Silence can therefore support reflection and understanding. Pfeifer and Wittmann (2020) show that silence alters perceptions of time, creating pauses that allow learners to recalibrate. These temporal shifts often benefit deeper reflection and shared understanding. Silence may also express relational care. hooks (1994) emphasises the ethical dimensions of presence, noting that attentive quietness can signal respect or solidarity. Such intersubjective silences, when a seminar 'thinks together', often represent crucial pedagogical moments, yet they remain largely unrecognised within dominant participation metrics.

Silence and participatory norms in higher education

Participation in many higher-education seminar contexts is often measured through talk, and speaking remains an implicit marker of academic confidence and competence. However, this assumption masks inequities in who feels able, entitled, or safe to speak. Gourlay (2015) critiques the normative elevation of participation within mainstream student-engagement discourse, while Macfarlane (2016) questions assessment practices that treat attendance, class participation, and group work as observable evidence of engagement. Together, these critiques caution against assuming a straightforward relationship between visible contribution and learning. Research across higher education also shows that institutional cultures reproduce expectations that reward particular identities and communicative styles (Ahmed 2012). Students who process information internally, speak more slowly, or come from cultural traditions that foreground listening may be at a disadvantage. Rapid questioning and fast-paced seminar dialogue may disadvantage students who need more time to reflect, process internally, or regulate emotions before contributing (Rowe 1986). Despite this evidence, pedagogical models often continue to treat silence as a sign of disengagement. Briffett-Aktaş and Ying (2025) further show that silence can constitute a valid form of academic voice, one

that prevailing participation frameworks undervalue. However, theoretical integration remains limited across the intersecting domains of power, identity, embodiment, and affect.

Addressing the gap: towards a framework of silent presence

Existing scholarship has established that silence may function as communicative, reflective, relational, and affective practice. However, higher-education research has often approached silence through distinct lenses, including classroom interaction, intercultural communication, student voice, student engagement and performativity, and small-group learning, leaving its cognitive, emotional, embodied, relational, and sociocultural dimensions only partially integrated. In particular, less attention has been given to how these dimensions intersect in students' experiences of engagement, recognition, and belonging within discussion-based learning environments. This study responds to that gap by developing the Seven Dimensions of Silent Presence, an interpretive framework that brings together cognitive, emotional, embodied, relational, and sociocultural dimensions of participation. In doing so, it reconceptualises silence not as the absence of engagement, but as a meaningful form of pedagogical presence.

Methodological approach

The study was conducted during the first two years of the undergraduate modules in Social Science and Education at a UK widening-participation university. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the research aimed to develop a contextually situated understanding of how students used silence in relation to seminar participation and classroom interaction. The study approached silent participation as shaped by seminar interaction, identity, and pedagogy.

The student cohort comprised first-year undergraduates from diverse educational, linguistic, and social backgrounds, including both home and international students. Specific nationalities are not disaggregated; home/international status provides the institutional context, while cultural and linguistic positioning is considered where it emerged in participants' accounts. Gendered experiences also appeared in the data, alongside race, class, disability, first-generation status, and multilingualism; these characteristics are treated as contextual dimensions rather than as variables for demographic subgroup comparison.

Data generation

Data were generated across two first-year undergraduate modules within Social Science and Education teaching contexts. The study drew on multiple qualitative sources to explore how students experienced and interpreted silence within seminar learning. These included 58 anonymised learning journals, observational field notes recorded after seminars, and two focus group discussions. The learning journals provided reflective accounts of how students used silence in relation to thinking, confidence, emotional regulation, and classroom interaction. The observational field notes documented patterns of participation, pauses, embodied attentiveness, and the broader atmosphere of seminar discussion. The focus group discussions invited students to reflect collectively

on how they experienced, interpreted, and negotiated silence within classroom dialogue. Together, these sources enabled exploration of silence across different dimensions of seminar participation.

Data analysis

Data analysis was initially informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis and later shaped by principles associated with reflexive thematic analysis, as developed in their subsequent work (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2021). The analysis proceeded iteratively through repeated reading, coding, memo-writing, and interpretive reflection across the different data sources. Initial coding focused on how students described silence in relation to seminar participation and classroom interaction. The learning journals, observational field notes, and focus group discussions were analysed together to explore how students experienced and interpreted silent participation within the seminar environment.

Throughout the analytic process, reflexive memos examined emerging assumptions and considered how my position as lecturer-researcher shaped my interpretation of classroom interaction. Rather than treating silence as a stable or fully knowable phenomenon, the analysis approached silent participation as context-dependent, relational, and open to multiple interpretations. The Seven Dimensions of Silent Presence emerged through iterative movement between coding, theoretical engagement, and reflective interpretation across the dataset. The framework was not derived through a linear coding process. Rather, it developed through an iterative dialogue between empirical accounts, reflexive interpretation, and relevant theoretical perspectives on silence, participation, embodiment, and recognition.

Positionality and ethics

As a white female lecturer working at a UK university with a widening participation remit, my interpretations are shaped by my social positioning and the institutional contexts within which students navigate silence. A positionality lens is essential in research on silence because lecturer interpretations carry significant power in determining how student presence is valued or misrecognised.

Reflexive writing, supervisory dialogue, and iterative memoing were used throughout the study to examine how my position within the seminar environment shaped my interpretations. These practices were particularly important because many of the behaviours interpreted as silent engagement could also be understood in alternative ways. Reflexive analysis, therefore, involved questioning how my assumptions about participation, confidence, and learning shaped the meanings attributed to students' silence.

Because the research took place in modules I taught, unavoidable power asymmetries may have shaped what students felt comfortable disclosing.

Silence also remained difficult to interpret with certainty. Moments understood as reflective, resistant, attentive, or emotionally protective may equally have reflected disengagement, uncertainty, fatigue, or strategic compliance. Rather than treating silence as fully knowable, the analysis approached silent participation as contextually situated and interpretively incomplete. The aim was therefore not to categorise silence

definitively, but to broaden pedagogical understandings of how participation may be experienced and enacted within seminar learning.

Findings

The themes below draw primarily on students' learning journals and focus group discussions, with observational field notes used to contextualise the embodied and relational dynamics participants described. The analysis examined how students engaged through silence, what purposes silence served in seminar learning, and how these quiet modes of participation intersected with power, emotion, and identity. Three inter-related themes emerged: silence as cognitive and emotional safety, silence as resistance and negotiation of power, and silence as embodied listening and sense-making. Together, these themes suggest that silence functioned in multiple ways within seminar learning, shaping how students engaged with discussion, reflection, and classroom interaction.

Silence as cognitive and emotional safety

Students consistently described silence as a protective space that enabled them to think and regulate an immediate verbal response. Many described using quietness to gather their thoughts, rehearse ideas internally, or check their understanding before speaking. In this sense, silence offered cognitive safety, particularly when grappling with complex or unfamiliar concepts.

One student wrote, 'Silence is where I work out what I want to say. I need a moment to get my words right before I speak in front of everyone'. Another explained that silence helped her manage the emotional labour of speaking in a group, noting, 'I stay quiet until I feel steady. If I speak when I am still thinking, I panic'.

Students also indicated that silence buffered them against perceived judgement. Several described being cautious about revealing confusion or offering a comment that might be dismissed. Quietness protected them as they assessed the room's atmosphere, peers' reactions, and the lecturer's expectations. For some, internal participation preceded external speech.

Silence as resistance and negotiation of power

Silence was also used as a form of agency. Students described moments where remaining quiet allowed them to resist dominant voices, protect themselves from classroom hierarchies, or push back against expectations that privileged fast or confident speech. For some, silence was an ethical refusal to participate in competitive dialogic dynamics or to reinforce assumptions about who should speak first or most.

One student noted, 'Sometimes I stay quiet because I do not want to play the game. It feels like the people who talk the most get listened to the most, so I withdraw'. Another explained that silence helped him avoid being positioned as a cultural or linguistic representative, noting, 'I am not going to speak so that I can be the 'international viewpoint'. Staying silent means I do not have to do that performance'.

Students further described silence as a way to challenge moments when discussions felt rushed or dominated by a few assertive peers. By withholding speech, they created

space for others, disrupted the momentum of dominant voices, or signalled discomfort with the discussion's pace or tone. For some students, silence was a form of quiet dissent, a way of saying 'I am here, but I do not agree with how this conversation is unfolding'.

Silence as embodied listening and sense-making

Students repeatedly described silence as an embodied and relational way of paying attention. Rather than signalling disengagement, a quiet presence often reflected attunement to the room, the lecturer, and peers. Students wrote about listening with their bodies, sensing shifts in mood, and observing subtle cues that shaped their understanding of the discussion.

One student explained, 'When I am silent, I am listening with everything: my eyes, how people sit, the atmosphere. It helps me understand more than just the words'. Another described moments of shared quiet where the room seemed to pause collectively, noting, 'There are times when no one speaks, but we are all thinking together. I can feel it'.

Students' descriptions of embodied listening included noticing body language, monitoring their posture, and adjusting their positioning in the space. These practices helped them interpret the discussion more deeply. Silence enabled them to process competing viewpoints, integrate new perspectives, and refine their own understanding. Several students commented that their most significant learning occurred during these quiet moments. Together, these themes suggest that silence functions in multiple ways within seminar learning rather than simply indicating disengagement.

Conceptual framework: the seven dimensions of silent presence

The findings informed the development of the Seven Dimensions of Silent Presence, an interpretive framework designed to explore how students engaged with silence in seminar learning. Initial coding generated overlapping categories related to different experiences of seminar participation. Through iterative comparison, memoing, and theoretical reflection, these categories were refined into seven interconnected dimensions.

The framework does not present silence as a fixed or singular phenomenon. Instead, the dimensions function as interpretive lenses through which different forms of quiet participation may be understood. In practice, several dimensions frequently overlapped as students navigated seminar participation (Table 1).

Cognitive processing

Silent presence is fundamentally a cognitive activity. Students used quietness to assemble ideas, evaluate arguments, absorb information, and rehearse potential contributions before speaking. This dimension recognises silence as a space for internal reasoning that precedes and scaffolds verbal participation. Cognitive work occurred even when no outward signs were visible, underscoring the limitations of equating participation with speech.

Table 1. Conceptual model of the seven dimensions of silent presence.

Dimension	Core function
Cognitive processing	Internal reasoning and idea formation
Emotional regulation	Managing anxiety and vulnerability
Embodied attunement	Bodily orientation and attentive presence
Relational ethic	Making space for others and maintaining atmosphere
Identity navigation	Managing race, class, language, and belonging
Epistemic positioning	Evaluating ideas and one's stance
Quiet resistance	Challenging dominant discussion norms

Emotional regulation

Silence also supported emotional labour within the seminar. Students used quietness to steady themselves, manage anxiety, or assess whether it felt safe enough to become audible. This dimension highlights the affective demands of participation and the ways students navigate vulnerability, judgement, and belonging through quiet modes of engagement. Emotional regulation is therefore an essential component of silent presence, not an obstacle to participation.

Embodied attunement

Students listened with and through their bodies. Silence involved shifts in posture, eye movement, breathing, and orientation towards others. These embodied practices helped students attune to mood, relational dynamics, and subtle cues within the seminar. In this dimension, silent presence is not merely internal; it is enacted through embodied attention that shapes students' engagement with academic dialogue.

Relational ethic

Silence often reflected students' relational awareness. Many held back to avoid dominating the room or to create space for quieter peers. Others stayed silent to respect the discussion's emotional tone or to ensure contributions were made with care. This dimension positions silence as an ethical practice, in which students consider how their presence affects others and how they contribute to the seminar's collective atmosphere.

Identity navigation

Silence intersected with students' experiences of race, class, gender, linguistic background, and disability. For some, quietness protected against stereotyping or unwanted visibility. For others, it let them resist being positioned as cultural spokespeople or navigate the pressures of being first-generation or multilingual learners. This dimension foregrounds the political and intersectional nature of silent presence, emphasising that silence cannot be understood without attending to identity and power.

Epistemic positioning

Students used silence to evaluate their stance within academic conversations. Silent presence allowed them to weigh ideas, decide how to position themselves in relation to the

course content, and assess the credibility of arguments before responding. This dimension shows how silence supports epistemic agency, enabling students to engage critically, even when they remain quiet.

Quiet resistance

Silence functioned as a form of resistance. Students sometimes withheld speech to challenge dominant voices, reject norms of competitive discussion, or disrupt the pace of seminars that privileged quick responses. This dimension recognises silence as an active and purposeful refusal, a way students claim agency in environments where speaking may feel unsafe, inequitable, or misaligned with their values.

Discussion

The findings suggest that silence within seminar learning cannot be understood simply as disengagement. More fundamentally, they challenge participation models that equate visibility with verbal contribution. Students' accounts indicate that engagement often takes the form of listening, reflection, emotional regulation, and embodied attentiveness rather than speech alone. The significance of silent presence, therefore, lies not only in recognising quieter students but also in reconsidering how participation itself is conceptualised within higher education. The study consequently shifts attention from whether students participate to how participation is recognised and valued within seminar learning.

Reframing participation beyond speech

Many participation frameworks still centre verbal contribution, often equating speaking with engagement and silence with disengagement. Scholarship on silence has long challenged this assumption, demonstrating that quietness functions rhetorically and communicatively rather than representing absence (Glenn 2004; Jaworski 1993). The present findings also sit alongside Gourlay's (2015) critique of participation as a normative measure of engagement and Macfarlane's (2015, 2016) concern with making student learning publicly observable. Students' accounts in this study suggest that meaningful participation can remain partially invisible within seminar discussions.

Recognising silent presence may require a broader understanding of how participation becomes visible in seminar learning, particularly in higher education contexts where participation is often measured by verbal contributions (Zepke 2018). When participation is measured solely through speech, learners who rely on quieter forms of engagement may be disadvantaged regardless of their intellectual involvement (Nakane 2006). Remedios et al.'s (2008) finding that minimal verbal participation need not indicate a lack of learning closely parallels the present study.

Silent presence as a site of equity and recognition

The intersectional dimensions of silent presence highlight how silence intersects with race, class, gender, language, and disability. Students' decisions to remain quiet were

shaped by fears of judgement, experiences of misrecognition, and concerns about being positioned as representatives of particular identities. Silence also protected students against the emotional and cognitive risks of speaking in spaces where confidence, fluency, and speed were implicitly rewarded. This aligns with Wang et al. (2022), who show that silence in UK intercultural classrooms is negotiated through agency and power rather than reduced to linguistic deficit.

These findings underscore the need for participation frameworks that recognise how institutional norms privilege certain communicative styles while marginalising others, often aligning with dominant forms of confidence, fluency, and cultural capital (Ahmed 2012). When lecturers privilege the most vocal forms of engagement, they may inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies.

Embodiment, emotion, and the atmosphere of learning

Students' descriptions of embodied listening suggest that silence is relational and atmospheric, aligning with phenomenological accounts of perception as a bodily orientation to the world (Merleau-Ponty 2002). Such embodied forms of attention shape how learners experience seminar discussion. When educators interpret silence solely as absence, they miss the subtle relational and embodied work students perform to create and maintain the conditions for collective learning. Recognising these quieter forms of engagement may encourage educators to attend more carefully to what is not immediately visible through speech.

Silent presence as agency and resistance

The findings also reveal that silence can be a deliberate form of agency. Students sometimes choose not to speak to resist dominant voices or to challenge competitive conversational norms. This echoes scholarship that reframes silence as a form of rhetorical or agentic practice rather than a simple absence of voice (Glenn 2004; Briffett-Aktaş and Ying 2025). In some cases, silence appeared connected to resistance to participation norms experienced as performative or inequitable. In others, students' decisions to remain quiet appeared to be connected to discomfort with the seminar's pace, tone, or dynamics.

Recognising silence as a form of pedagogical presence has important implications for how seminar participation is understood and facilitated. If silence represents meaningful engagement rather than disengagement, pedagogical practices that interpret quietness solely as absence risk overlooking significant forms of learning. Consequently, the framework raises questions about how seminar teaching recognises participation.

Implications for teaching practice

The findings suggest that seminar pedagogy may need to interpret silence more carefully. Rather than treating quietness primarily as absence or disengagement, educators may benefit from recognising that students participate in different ways and at different paces. Creating space for reflective pauses, listening, and slower responses may support broader participation in seminar learning. This does not require lowering

participation expectations. Rather, it invites educators to distinguish between participation as observable verbal contribution and participation as engagement with learning. Recognising this distinction may enable more inclusive pedagogical practices while preserving the dialogic purposes of seminar teaching.

Contributions to higher education scholarship

This study contributes to higher education scholarship in three ways. First, it demonstrates that silence may function as a meaningful form of pedagogical presence rather than simply the absence of participation. Second, it extends existing understandings of participation by showing how engagement may be enacted through cognitive, emotional, embodied, relational, and political activities that are not always visible through speech. Third, it introduces the Seven Dimensions of Silent Presence as an interpretive framework for recognising quieter forms of engagement within seminar learning. Together, these contributions challenge speech-centred assumptions about participation and offer a more inclusive account of how higher education recognises engagement.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was conducted within a single institutional context and reflects the dynamics of two undergraduate modules, which limits broader generalisation. The reflective-practitioner methodology also positions the lecturer as both a researcher and a participant in the pedagogical environment, shaping how silence is interpreted. While this proximity provided valuable insight into classroom dynamics, further research across different institutional settings and disciplines would strengthen the understanding of silent participation.

A further limitation concerns participation within the focus groups themselves. Students who volunteered may not have represented the full range of experiences of silence within the seminar cohorts. It is also possible that some students who were quieter during seminars chose not to participate in focus group discussions. In addition, the focus groups generated their own participation dynamics, meaning that silence in these discussions may have reflected social and relational processes distinct from those operating in seminar learning. These considerations reinforce the interpretive limits of understanding silence solely through participant accounts.

Moreover, silence may carry different meanings across disciplinary, cultural, and institutional contexts. The interpretations developed here are therefore situated within discussion-based Social Science and Education seminars and should not be assumed to transfer directly to other higher-education settings. The interpretation of silence also remains necessarily partial. Silence may indicate reflection, attentiveness, resistance, uncertainty, fatigue, disengagement, or multiple experiences simultaneously. Although the framework developed in this study offers one way to understand quieter forms of participation, it should be understood as an interpretive lens rather than a definitive account of what silence means across all seminar contexts.

Conclusion

This study raises broader questions about how higher education recognises participation. Moments of silence that initially appeared disengaged were often experienced by students as opportunities to think, listen, and negotiate participation. Recognising silent presence does not require abandoning discussion-based seminar learning. Rather, it invites a reconsideration of how higher education recognises, values, and supports participation. If participation is understood only through speech, important forms of learning may remain unseen. Expanding participation beyond verbal contribution, therefore, represents not simply a pedagogical adjustment but a shift in how engagement itself is understood.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr Ngoc Quynh Anh Phan, Lecturer in Higher Education and Academic Practice at the University of Kent, for translating the abstract into Vietnamese and confirming its accuracy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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