Silence

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I'm sure many will have experienced a similar situation. I was attending a conference, and – having queued up to register and collect the conference pack of goodies – was browsing through the programme of presentations to see what were the hot topics of the day and wondering what would catch my interest. One of the titles jumped out at me. It was about silence and specifically the value of silence for learning. One of the reasons that I was intrigued by it was the counterpoint that it provided to my own contribution to the conference – that was about discussion and the value of 'design-talk' as a design development tool. So I was immediately set speculating about how these two apparent opposites (talk and silence) could both be valuable in learning.

The whole thing gets more complicated when we recognise that talking and thinking are so intimately connected.

> The things we can say are in effect the things we can think. Words are the terms of our thinking as well as the terms in which we present our thoughts, because they present the objects of thought to the thinker himself. (Langer S 1962)

I was frequently told to 'stop talking' at school, but never to 'stop thinking'. Everyone in education would presumably see the value of thinking – even if they want quiet. It's just that in 'thought' mode we don't vocalise the words. But what about thoughts that result in other forms of representation …like sketches? If two people sit in front of a piece of paper and sketch a design idea together – perhaps taking turns to add new elements or adjust existing ones – does this constitute a conversation? A graphic conversation? It could be silent – but the exchange of ideas and meanings could easily be very rich. In a sense, articulated words are completely unnecessary for this conversation. Both participants could well be preoccupied with the turbulent consideration of possibilities for resolving whatever issues they face. Their heads are screaming with it, even if – in the external world – there appears to be near silence and the scratching of pencils

Tony Lawler, a colleague of mine at Goldsmiths, did an experiment with a group of design students at a college in Belgium. He set them a design task and put them in groups to develop solutions. But there were some special rules about the groups. Some groups could *only* use discussion as their means of development. Some groups could *only* use sketching/drawing. And some could *onl*y use making/modelling. The point was to draw to their attention the very different strengths and weaknesses of these three modes of representation in design development. But for the purposes of this piece it is worth noting that they all managed to complete the task in their very different ways – and two of the three groups did it in silence.

But this is very different from the silence that is revered in the religious/spiritual world. The point here is not mere quiet, but *inner* quiet. In other words, its no good just refraining from talk if your

head is full of the things that you would otherwise be talking about. You have to empty your head too. Father Thomas Keeting, a Trappist monk, describes his...'affinity for "interior silence"….moving beyond dependence on concepts and words to a direct encounter with God on the level of faith and interior silence.' This seems to me to be a much more extreme kind of silence – when the mind is effectively wiped clean to enable it to be fully open and receptive to the will of a deity. Coming from a western academic tradition, I'm a bit nervous about this view of silence. It seems a bit like closing down the mind rather than expanding it …abdicating one's intellectual birthright and handing it over to another entity. I find it hard to imagine a point when my head stops telling me things and arguing with me. But then Keeting doesn't claim that this inner silence is easy, and he, along with many other religious writers, have offered tools - like meditation - to aid the process. Interestingly, many religions in India (Hindu / Jainism / Buddism) invoke Mauna… a vow of silence, and the label sage really means 'silent one'.

Silence then can mean all sorts of things and can be used for all sorts of purposes. The 'silence' paper at the conference was by Steve Hartfield from the University of Technology in Sydney. Having identified multiple kinds of silence – he focussed on what for me is the interesting one … about planned silences to improve the learning experience. I was introduced to the idea of 'silent pedagogy' – which is much smarter than my instincts initially predicted, essentially being about allowing space for learners to work things out … deliberately refraining from intervention … encouraging autonomy in the learner … thoughts free from intrusion. For readers interested in pursuing 'silent pedagogy' it seems that Ollin R (2008) is a key reference.

By contrast to Hartfield's presentation, mine was about talking – and specifically 'design-talk' as a means of design development. A year ago my 'limestone' reflection for this journal (2016:1) outlined a project we were working on that involves having conversations with learners about their work. Only the conversations are with a digital avatar (often an animated yellow duck). After a good deal of classroom/workshop research and trials, these conversations are now structured to move through several phases. The conversations start with broad scene-setting questions like … 'what is your project about / who is it for?' moving to more challenging and speculative questions like … 'how could it be useful or adapted for other users / how might it work in the dark?' and ending with empowering questions like… 'what do you plan to do next / is there anything you need to find out about?'. These question types were the focus of considerable experiment and we found that quite consistently 'what/how' questions tend to encourage mere *description* of what is going on – whereas 'what if / how might' questions tend to encourage deeper thought and more *speculation* about possible futures. We have used the avatar to explore these deeper questions in our 'conversations'

Anyhow, the project has been completed and we have all the data back from the school trials - and specifically the evaluation data from learners. Despite the apparently rather fanciful nature of the idea (isn't it a bit weird asking learners to have a conversation with a duck?) 72% of them agreed or strongly agreed that 'the duck seemed to know what I am designing'. This is a compliment to the augmented intelligence that is built into the tool. But also 65% of them agreed or strongly agreed that the duck 'made me think more about my next step'. So far so good, but having got to that stage I was left with some intriguing questions about the nature of the conversations that were taking place.

A lot of our classroom experimentations took place as 'real' conversations between learners and the research team, and were recorded and subsequently transcribed. But now that the AI avatar is fully up-and-running, learners communicate with it by texting or typing onto a screen, where the avatar replies with a screen-based follow-up question. To put it another way, these avatar conversations are silent. At least they are silent in the physical sense that no words are *spoken*. But they are (hopefully) very noisy in the sense that they provoke masses of noisy thought in learners' heads.

So my question now is what is the difference between a real oral conversation and a silent text-based conversation? I do not believe that there is no difference – since the experience is so different. We asked the learners for their thoughts on this topic – or at least we asked them whether they preferred a real talking conversation or a silent text-based one. Two contrasted responses were as follows.

> "It's a bit bizarre. But I think it helps. I think the one talking to it helps more because you're saying it out loud rather than in your head whereas typing it you don't really think about typing it... you just write down words. So you're kind of helping yourself if you're talking to something rather than typing it".

> "Probably typing because then you have more chance to think about your answer, how you word it. And so you can kind of gather your ideas while you type".

I think there is a lot more water to flow under this particular bridge. The challenge remains open and at the heart of it lie some intriguing questions about the nature, the purpose and the effects of silence.

References

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