Listening to the
Silences in Our Classrooms
A Study of Quiet Students

> No one dared
> Disturb the sound of silence.
>
> —Simon and Garfunkel, *Sounds of Silence*

It is any Tuesday, 2:29 p.m. I walk into the room that houses my College Writing class. Students are pulling desks into a haphazard circle we'll need to dismantle later. As class begins, Frank writes frantically, and I choose to believe he's so enthralled by the discussion of organization or academic language or audience that he's feverishly taking notes. A placid half-smile flickers across Maggie's face as she turns to study each speaker, nodding mechanically. Alice blinks at me, pensively munching the end of her ponytail. And there's a distinct possibility that Steve, my fraternity-brother-student, is asleep under the brim of the baseball cap that shades his eyes.

By the end of class, not much seems to have changed with these students. Frank writes, Maggie smiles, Alice chews, Steve's baseball cap bobs. They've written; they've been physically present; sometimes, they've even tried to laugh at my jokes. But not one of them has spoken. Their silence, their sheer determination *not* to say anything, their presence reproaches me.

Within a discipline that elevates dialogue and constructed knowledge, and within a home writing program that supports this theoretical standpoint by mandating practices such as student publications and peer feedback, I work to develop a pedagogy of dialogue. For me

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this means a writing class that centers on student voices. Through the exercises I choose and the daily routine we follow, I try to transmit this vision of learning to my students.

Still, every semester I find a Frank, a Maggie, an Alice, a Steve—students whose silences overpower the voices that fill class discussions. And on rough days, I'm startled to realize that I've begun to resent these students and whatever it is that drives them into their silences.

I know what I see: hostility, passiveness, resistance, lack of preparation. I begin to construct explanations that account for the silences—explanations that coincidentally define my students' behaviors in terms of their flaws. But these explanations offer me little that is useful: my students remain quiet. And I remain tense, unable to coax or tease or shock them out of silence.

This is the introduction to a paper I presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication; I continued, tracing how my students saw their own silences. But my audience focused on this scene, these all-too-familiar students, my frustration. For many in the audience, the tension I alluded to was compounded by their sense that a required course such as College Writing (the single compulsory course at the university where I was teaching) often evokes resistance that students express passively through their silences. During the discussion, audience members enumerated for each other the crimes of student silence: students who do not volunteer to speak in class; students who seem uncomfortable, even resentful, when called on; students who appear unwilling to speak to partners and small groups; students who seem to strive for single-word answers whenever possible. We talked about the particular topics that seemed to provoke student silence, challenging texts, the wisdom of our professional discourse, and the imperative to get students talking.

The audience shied away from what I saw as the real heart of the paper: that how I saw these students was often radically different from how they saw themselves, that students see their silences through a different lens than we do, that they use a different vocabulary to talk about classroom dynamics. It was as if we were unable to move beyond *our* visions of failure to seriously consider the challenges students' perspectives might fruitfully offer us. In retrospect, perhaps I should not have been surprised at the direction this conversation took, given how deeply ingrained in many of us compositionists is the desire for student dialogue. Since then, I have heard countless colleagues say (in tones ranging from desperation to undisguised contempt), "*They just won't talk. How do I get them to/convince them to/encourage them to talk in class? I want to hear* their *voices.*"

So the questions of this conference presentation have lingered for me. How *do* the Franks, the Maggies, the Alices, and the Steves see the silences

in our classrooms? How do they construct their own experiences in relation to this issue that is so highly charged for teachers? What narratives, discourses, and values do they draw on in these constructions? How do such constructions affect students' perceptions of and experiences in composition classes, in particular? In this book, I attempt to address these questions through a qualitative study of one College Writing class at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Returning to my conference presentation and the responses of the audience will clarify my goals for this current, larger project: to question the teacher-constructions of student silence as always negative, and to try to understand the ways students may see silence differently than we do. While I believe our perspectives and theoretical orientations are important, these constructions are, by their very nature, limited. And yet these limited constructions have virtually achieved (for teachers, at least) the status of *a priori* knowledge about quiet students. Linda Brodkey argues:

> We can only hope to transform a hegemonic practice with a narrative that insists on interrupting a story told in a classroom or in the academy that has acquired the status of lived experience, reality, logic, science, or any of the other seemingly unassailable stories that have acquired the status of authoritative discourse. The only way to fight a hegemonic discourse is to teach ourselves and others alternative ways of seeing the world.[1]

I believe these quiet students' stories call into question *our* authoritative discourse, our seemingly unassailable stories about classroom silence. While the stories we teachers may tell about classroom silence and quiet students may seem irrefutable, the perspectives of students offer us an important way of re-seeing the classroom. A consideration of the experiences, constructions, and reactions of these students invites us to redefine and expand how we think about these students, our classrooms, and the value of silence.

Background

In *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut,* Donald L. Finkel persuasively critiques our culture's image of the "great teacher" as one rooted in the archetypal act of *Telling.* He claims that we mistakenly equate the "great teacher" with a brilliant lecturer who inspires students with her displays of profound knowledge and mastery of the subject. She has a contagious enthusiasm about the subject, and she appears to be able to speak endlessly (to the enjoyment of her rapt students). In telling, she gives knowledge.[2] And the docile student—the one who can be taught—must be silent in order to receive that knowledge.

However, I see in our culture a second, perhaps even more powerful image of the "great teacher": the discussion leader who is able to inspire each student's passion, intellect, self-reflection, personal growth, and political awareness. Such teachers, through their skillful combination of probing questions, inspiring comments, and willingness to listen to students' voices, not only teach their subject more effectively but also teach their students to become better people. Both inside and outside the academy, this type of teacher (mythologized in mainstream culture through such films as *Dead Poets Society* or *Dangerous Minds* and even the more complex *Half Nelson*) is often represented as subversive in overthrowing the traditional Telling-model of education that Finkel critiques.

In the movement away from a model of education that is centered on the lecturing voice of a teacher and the monologic delivery of knowledge from teacher to receptive student, the model of the "good student" has likewise changed. Rather than celebrating the silent student (one therefore receptive to the knowledge doled out by the teacher in lecture-sized portions), this new paradigm imagines a vocal, "active" student whose classroom activity is an integral part of the construction of knowledge. In particular, much contemporary composition pedagogy is premised on this notion of dialogic education rooted in the work of theorists such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Kenneth Bruffee.

Dewey's notion of "active participation . . . expression and cultivation of individuality . . . learning through experience"[3] anticipates contemporary pedagogy's postmodern interest in collaborative learning. Like Dewey, Freire claims that "authentic thinking" can only take place through dialogue; a teacher's fundamental mission is to engage in a dialogue with her students about her views *and* theirs. Freire argues for the centrality of dialogue and its liberatory potential:

> To speak is to transform the world. . . . Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. . . . If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity . . . trust is established by dialogue. . . . Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.[4]

In the work of composition scholars such as Bruffee and Harvey Weiner, "dialogue" and student talk have become a central component of the classroom. As Bruffee claims:

> Our task must involve engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and the reading

process as possible, and that we should contrive to ensure that students' conversation about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to read and write. The way they talk with each other determines the way they will think and the way they will write.[5]

This emphasis on student talk and dialogue (sometimes represented as "voice") is one of the few issues uniting compositionists from divergent political orientations within the field—from Mary Rose O'Reilley to David Bartholomae. While *voice* has become a contested term and while some might dispute Bruffee's expansive claims for student dialogue (most notably, John Trimbur in "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning"), few compositionists would argue against "dialogue" as representing all that is productive, empowering, and valuable in our often fragmented efforts as a field.

Hepzibah Roskelly summarizes composition's disciplinary concern with dialogue in this way:

> All of us compositionists believe in group work. In this post-Vygotskian, post-Freirian age it's impossible not to. The terms that dominate our collective conversations in conferences and in our journals—collaboration, peer response, discourse community, constructed knowledge—have become symbols for a pedagogical agenda that values talk and activity as learning tools. . . . A person learns in groups as he listens and speaks, and he learns about himself as well as the culture he inhabits. He may act to change that culture; he most certainly will be changed by it.[6]

However, the ideal student-learners of composition's "group work" are not always those we see in our classrooms when this paradigm of education is implemented. Rather than embracing dialogue, our students often appear to resist teacherly efforts at collaborative learning and constructed knowledge. While the silences initiated by teachers are seen as productive and natural (and generally unremarked upon), those silences initiated by students are troubling, problematic, and disruptive. These quiet students constitute a central classroom tension for many teachers—those who have a theoretical grounding in dialogic and collaborative learning; those who value it on a practical or an experiential level; and those who construct themselves as simply wanting to hear the voices of their students.

I do not wish to argue against this model of dialogic education; in fact, it underlies much of my own teaching.[7] But I do wish to consider what limitations this model imposes. In this paradigm, the good student, the student who learns, is the "active" student; *active* has become synonymous with highly vocal. When our model of education posits highly vocal students, those quiet or silent

students in our classrooms, then, may appear to mark some sort of failure or breakdown of this pedagogy. And while many teachers internalize a student's silence as marking the failure of the *teacher* to sufficiently engage her students or to implement a theoretical vision, others focus on the failure of the *student* to meet the teacher's or institution's expectations. As I will explore in chapter 2, in either of these visions, inevitably someone must be held accountable for the perceived failure that is marked by silence.

Much of the scholarship about so-called "silent students" connects silence with a literal or metaphorical lack or absence. Janet Collins's remarks in *The Quiet Child*, a study of elementary schoolchildren, typify such a position: "Allowing children to be passive observers deprives them of important learning experiences."[8] Such accounts are based on the implicit theorizing that students are silent because they are passive, unprepared, or uncritical, and that without outwardly visible and measurable manifestations (such as speaking), students are not engaged. These students are constructed through a deficit model: they fail to meet the minimum standards a teacher sets. Again, Collins's work characterizes a prevalent view: "Quiet pupils have to be encouraged to be more assertive and find their voice in the classroom."[9] Such an assertion assumes that if a teacher cannot hear a student's voice then she does not have one, and that an optimal combination of pedagogical strategies will enable a student to move beyond whatever keeps her unproductively silent.

Other explorations of silence cluster around a concern for the political and social implications of silence and what Michelle Fine and Lois Weis call "the dynamics of power and privilege that nurture, sustain, and legitimate silencing."[10] Feminist theory, critical pedagogy, and multicultural studies help us define silence as a response to the oppressive mechanisms and the politics of a particular culture perpetuating or enforcing particular codes of silence, what Tillie Olsen has called "unnatural silences." For example, in *Organizing Silence*, Robin Patric Clair theorizes how such silencing is effected through coercion, the exertion of force, and hegemony—the systems of control "'normalized' through institutions such as the family, education, religion, systems of law and systems of enforcement, medicine, and general administration."[11] The assumption of such examinations is clear: as the title of Fine and Weis's volume suggests, our efforts should be directed toward moving "beyond silence."

Here it is important to acknowledge the growing body of literature that argues that silence can be a legitimate choice. Cheryl Glenn, George Kalamaras, Adrienne Rich, and others challenge the more prevalent culturally inscribed definitions and interpretations of "the problem of silence." In the final chapter, I will explore this thinking in light of my students' observations about the value they perceive in choosing to be silent. At this point in my argument, however, I suggest that these perspectives and rereadings of silence still carry far less weight in

our conversations about the silences and quiet students in our classrooms. Students who choose not to speak are described through a rhetoric of failure: these students are seen by what they do not do rather than by what they *choose* to do.

Strikingly absent from most of these explorations of silence are the perspectives of students. It is a noticeable lack. Typically our literature shows the attempts of teachers and theorists to understand, even to rationalize, the silence of their students, with varying degrees of criticism or political justification. Yet we have failed to consider the insights our students' constructions could offer us about this dynamic.[12]

With Linda Brodkey, I believe that "we see the world from a particular vantage point . . . what can be seen by either the human eye or a human theory is necessarily partial, that is, both an *incomplete* and an *interested* account of whatever is envisioned."[13] Our constructions of student silence represent partial and interested accounts, ones that may offer useful theorizing into classroom dynamics but that ultimately fail to look outside of our own positions as teachers and theorists.

In my preliminary research, I was struck by how radically differently students view the dynamics of class discussions and oral participation than do their teachers. For example, I have encountered several students who saw themselves as highly vocal when I had unconsciously labeled them "silent students." And in my observations of a class populated by juniors and seniors who were Education majors, I was impressed by how vocal and comfortable the students appeared to be in discussing professional texts and their own writing. The professor concurred, arguing that they were some of the most skilled and sophisticated users of academic discourse she had encountered in her numerous years of teaching. However, more than three-quarters of these future teachers saw themselves as "quiet students," a label they understood to be problematic.

In addition, my preliminary research has suggested that students understand their own silences in far more complicated ways than we do, often seeing multiple causes and issues at play in a teacher's request for oral participation and their decisions to speak or not. Through the research that comprises this book, I have had the opportunity to explore these issues further. In the broadest terms, this data can be grouped around students' concern for teachers and their pedagogies, their sense of identity and community relationships, and their readings of silence that call into question our sense of classroom silence as inherently problematic.

Current pedagogy tends toward monolithic explanations of student silence: it is the failure to engage in empowering dialogue, or it is the product of political and cultural forces that makes *silence* an action. Both of these positions and their underlying principles strike me as valid and useful considerations of classroom dynamics. But I believe our classrooms and our students are

too complex to be summarized in such assertions. As Mimi Orner claims in her critique of "calls for student voice," classrooms are the

> complex conjunctures of histories, identities, ideologies, local, national, and international events and relations. Those who would distill only singular, stable meanings from student silence ignore the profoundly contextual nature of all classroom interaction. Those who "read" student silence simply as resistance or ideological-impairment replicate forms of vanguardisms which construct students as knowable, malleable objects, rather than as complex contradictory subjects.[14]

Orner's critique is an important one, leading me to question our disciplinary construction of student silence as always negative. This critique is one that underlies my project: when we speak for quiet students in the ways we have, what might we be missing?

Study Design:
Collecting Silences and the
Roles of the Teacher and the Researcher

I collect silences.

—Heinrich Böll, "Murke's Collected Silences"

This study draws on the rich and varied traditions and practices of teacher-research that underlie essays such as Fishman and McCarthy's "Boundary Conversations: Conflicting Ways of Knowing in Philosophy and Interdisciplinary Research," Atwell's "Everyone Sits at a Big Desk," Curtis and Klem's "The Virtual Context: Ethnography in the Computer-Equipped Writing Classroom," and Faigley's "Subverting the Electronic Notebook: Teaching Writing Using Networked Computers,"[15] to name but a few.

Joy Ritchie argues, "Many feminist academicians continue to operate within a binary perspective, placing intellect against emotion, separating reason from experience, and ultimately setting theory against practice. As a result, important connections between feminist theory and practice are masked, and we lose sight of our common purposes."[16] I believe many researchers continue to see teaching and research in such an opposition. For example, E. David Wong argues that research and teaching have "distinct priorities. In brief, the primary goal of research is to understand; the primary goal of teaching is to help students understand."[17] Ultimately this dichotomy makes little sense to me in practice, as my teaching and research inform each other constantly. Owen van

den Berg claims, "insiders research what they teach; they do not cease to teach in order to research. The goal of their research is to improve their practice; the goal of their teaching is to enhance the education of their students so that the students might become full democratic agents in the society."[18] To be both teacher and researcher requires "neither a split in attention nor a conflict in attention.[19] This particular research project formalized for me the kinds of evaluations and decisions inherent, even unconscious, in the process of teaching a composition class; in fact, I suspect I was a *better* teacher, as I documented the kinds of investigations and analyses one always makes as a teacher. Further, I was careful to vary course structures to allow my students and me to consider issues of voice and silence in a range of ways, and I was more rigorous in interrogating how and why I reached the conclusions I did about my own and my students' behaviors and responses. Jane Zeni believes that such research "opens the boundary between practice and research, because doing research becomes central to how one teaches."[20]

I believe this study proposes a way to coinvestigate a question with students, without radically altering the course structure and agenda to accommodate one's investigation; the class that became the subject of this study fundamentally remained a College Writing class, parallel to its sister sections. Along with Marian M. Mohr, I believe "Teacher-researchers are teachers first."[21] That is, while I designed my class to accommodate my research agenda, my questions could never dominate or obscure the primary objectives of the composition course I had been assigned to teach. I made the conscious commitment that if the occasion arose that experimentations with classroom design, and so on might benefit my research questions without advancing students' learning, then these questions would, out of necessity, be abandoned. (In the course of the research, however, pursuing my research questions did not conflict with students' learning, so neither objective was "compromised" by the "dual roles" I inhabited.[22]) My "minimally invasive" research agenda did not change the teaching and learning goals that the university Writing Program demanded. Further, and most important, this research design allowed students a maximum degree of control over their participation.

I chose to focus my research on the students in my own section of College Writing,[23] for several reasons. Because these issues of "voice" and "silence" are so loaded for both teachers and students, asking students to reveal themselves is also highly charged, requiring a high degree of trust and comfort that I do not believe I could have achieved as an observer in someone else's classroom. Of course, this raises important ethical objections: Did students make "unfettered decisions" about their participation in the study, without "fear of the consequences of not participating"?[24] Could my own students truly feel "safe" telling me what they really thought? Did their classroom relationships with me alter and limit what they could say? In order to account for those potential difficulties

in the design of my study, I did not examine any data students offered until after the semester was over. Their written reflections were kept in sealed envelopes until their grades were submitted and students had the opportunity to renegotiate their participation. Interviews were conducted the following semester.

I also studied my own class because I would be able to engage my students, as research participants, in a wide range of classroom situations in which they might consider their decisions to speak or to be silent by varying the structures used to elicit their voices and to shape classroom conversation, deliberately building into the class opportunities for silence.

Finally, I was concerned that in another teacher's class, the focus of my investigation might have shifted away from the perspectives of students to account for the instructor's constructions in a substantive way and replicated the teacher-focused sort of theorizing and research that has characterized our discipline's thinking about student silence. To do so would have obscured the student-centered questions that prompted this research.

After the initial phase of research during the semester (explained later in "Sources"), I focused my research with students who self-identified as quiet students and who volunteered to continue their participation in the project. I did not deliberately pursue particular students I might have labeled "quiet." (From here on, I refer to them as "focal students" to distinguish them from the rest of the class.[25]) Because this label of "quiet student" often carries a stigma for those who understand it as a sign of deficiency or failure as a student, I believe that my labeling students this way would have been counterproductive to my larger objectives in this research. For me to have actively solicited students who otherwise might not have chosen to be interviewed would have, in a significant way, replicated what they already experienced when teachers try to "encourage" their oral participation. Doing so would have centered the investigation on *my* teacherly constructions.

Researching one's own class evokes a question about a conflict between the roles of teacher and researcher. I believe I was able to minimize this potential conflict through my study design. Students could choose not to participate in the project at all (although everyone did submit at least three of the four journal entries); because I did not read any of the written material until after the semester was over, students were assured that any (negative) reflections would not compromise their standing in the class. Periodically, students would prompt a discussion about my research, through direct questions about how I became interested in the topic, my perceptions of other teachers' interpretations of quiet students, and what I "hoped" to find through my research. Such questions seemed important to address in the forum in which they arose, whether in one-on-one conversations or in the full class. This seemed both a way to model intellectual inquiry and research (a focus of this composition course) and an important and ethical way to invite students to act as coinvestigators in this project.

Breaking the Silence about Silence?

When I was designing this project, a colleague asked if I might have difficulty obtaining data. How do you study silence? Would asking students to talk about their silence challenge the very premise of the project? My colleague's half-joking questions point to a larger, more complicated issue—the potentially skewing effect that speaking about silence might have on the data, a so-called "Hawthorne Effect," in which "behavior during the course of an experiment can be altered by a subject's awareness of participating in that experiment."[26] In other words, would participating in this project and *talking* about their decisions about speaking and silences change students' experiences of these, thereby invalidating the results of the study? Ultimately, Stephen R. G. Jones's rereadings of the initial Hawthorne experiments[27] that continue to influence the social sciences and research in the psychology of education were persuasive to me: while the received wisdom may be that participation in a research study skews the results, meta-analysis does not support this conclusion. Further, Gordon Diaper's examination of various studies, including those in education, leads him to conclude, "It would not be exaggerating to call the Hawthorne Effect a myth."[28] Thus talking about their decisions to speak or to be silent should not have affected how my students perceived these decisions or how they, in fact, acted in the classroom that formed the basis of this research.

This, however, led to another interesting question: what does it mean to *break the silence about silence?* Ultimately, in research methodology I loosely followed the lead of researchers interested in silence, such as Keith Basso, Cheryl Glenn, and Carol Gilligan, as well as Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule.[29] Each draws on interviews, asking participants to name their experiences and to make meaning out of them. In this way, these researchers suggest that it is important to move beyond the traditional research paradigm in which "outsiders"—the researchers—investigate, name, and analyze to invite insider-participants to speak for themselves as coinvestigators whose voices must be heard. I wanted my research with quiet students to follow in this tradition, in the belief that such "qualitative research has to be collaborative arises from the recognition that participants hold multiple perspectives on what is occurring in social situations and what the meaning of those occurrences are. Educational innovation and research are socially complex phenomena that involve the 'process of coming to grips with the multiple of people who are the main participants.'"[30]

Furthermore, in American culture, to "break the silence" is often represented as a powerful political and social act. For example, in reviewing the first thirty Web sites that emerge in a Google search of the phrase, it becomes evident how powerful even this language is, as it is used in relation to therapy abuse, family violence, sexual assault, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-gender) issues, diabetes,

Palestinian refugee camps, HIV/AIDS, elder abuse, rape counseling, witnessing Christ, and colorectal cancer: the words "breaking the silence" themselves seem to have power. In class discussions of this project, in written reflections, and in various interview conversations, students seemed to understand the inherent weightiness of their participation in this project, even in very brief conversations about classroom silence—that to speak about silence is, in some ways, a political act, as it works, even in a very small way, as a corrective to the ways they have been named and misnamed by their teachers and the academy to which they seek membership.

Sources

1. Student journals. At several points during the semester, my students reflected informally on classroom silence by narrating a moment from the previous weeks when they or other students were (or were not) quiet and then commenting on why this struck them as remarkable. Like Madeline Grumet, I argue that "we are, at least partially, constituted by the stories we tell to others and to ourselves about experience."[31] What stories students tell themselves about their experiences of classroom silence[32] constitute—to some degree— their identities. These identities, I believe, shape students' interactions in and constructions of the classroom.

But I did not imagine these informal reflections as solipsistic exercises. That is, "autobiographical reflection [was] understood not just as an individual exercise but as a process that always takes place within a social context."[33] Thus I asked my students to consider each reflection in a larger context (of our class, of their educational histories) and to include their analysis of these observations. In their final reflections, I explicitly directed students to consider what connections they saw between the stories they told.

Students created these accounts as part of their journals, so my project imposed no additional requirements. Each student sealed her reflections in an envelope and signed across the seal to ensure this writing remained private until the end of the semester. Because of the complicated power dynamics that emerged through working with my own students (particularly centered around grading and evaluation), I was concerned that reading these accounts during the semester would radically alter my perception of these students and would inhibit what they chose to share. If students so chose, they were able to retract their consent after the semester was over.[34] Since many students did not perceive themselves as "quiet" or "silent," they were invited to explore their experiences in other classes or to examine the silences of others.[35]

2. My own teaching journal. I completed a teaching journal following each class that included the dynamics I established in a particular class (i.e., structures for interaction, particular requirements for discussions) and a narrative of what I saw happening in that class for both the students and me.

Later it proved useful to explore the connections between my interpretations of a particular class and those of my students in order to more fully understand the radical disjuncture between their perceptions and mine.

This commitment to self-reflection made me conscious of those reactions and constructions that would typically remain unexamined, even unarticulated, in the course of a semester. Such a self-consciousness and acknowledgment of the ways my own tacit values shape my work encouraged (in fact, forced) me to be more careful in both my teaching and my research.[36] As Anne Herrington argues:

> We should stop and reflect on our actions, trying to identify the beliefs that guide us and reflect critically on them in light of alternatives. That reflection may reaffirm our commitment to how we have been acting or it may lead us to change. Regardless, if we engage in such reflection, we will be more likely to actually make choices and have a fuller understanding for our reasons for doing so.[37]

3. Follow-up interviews. These form the core of the project. I conducted a series of interviews with five focal students who volunteered to participate in this phase of my research; they identified themselves as "quiet" students, students unlikely (or less likely than their classmates) to choose to speak during class. Certainly the perspectives of highly vocal students are critical in understanding the classroom dynamics of discussion and student interaction and merit further extended exploration. (One brief example is that we often assume that vocal students are learning more, learning better through their oral participation. However, this explanation may not adequately account for their motives in "class participation," as several students in my study argue.) But in this present study, I was committed to working with those quiet students whose voices may rarely be heard, both in our classrooms and in our research. Teachers, researchers, and theorists have attempted to *speak for* quiet students by offering interpretations of their students' behaviors; this study asks us to listen more carefully to what these students themselves can tell us about their decisions, our assumptions, and our teaching.

My primary concern was to understand how students construct their own experiences and to explore what those insights can offer us about the classroom.[38] Therefore, I relied on a fundamental principle that links naturalistic research, in-depth interviewing, and feminist research—an interest in the everyday experiences of others, an assertion that the thoughts and feelings of others constitute valid research data, and the belief that the meaning they make of these experiences is able to be made explicit.[39] I chose interviews as one of my primary sources of data because, as I. E. Seidman claims, they are

> a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives constitute

education. As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language. It affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration.[40]

With each student, I conducted three open-ended interviews. In the first, I asked students to describe their experiences with oral class participation—the times it was successful or unsuccessful in their perspectives, moments they were vocal or silent, and moments that were particularly memorable for them. In the second interview, we explored the context of the students' history, particularly their history in school. I developed an Interview Guide,[41] a broad list of questions, to shape the second interviews. However, my objective was to elicit and explore those stories and issues that students suggested. These questions were revised to reflect the specific local issues and themes that emerged from the journals produced during the previous semester; I asked questions in an organic fashion, following the direction of students' reflections, rather than a rigid format. Indeed, as Ruth Ray argues, "Students are not merely subjects whom the teacher-researcher instructs and assesses; they are co-researchers, sources of knowledge whose insights help focus and provide new directions for the study."[42] In the third interview, I asked students to explore in more depth both the written accounts they produced and the interview transcripts. Students commented on their own narratives and considered the themes, patterns, and concerns they saw emerging in these texts.

4. Student essays. During the course of the semester, two students wrote essays that seemed particularly relevant to this research. With their permission, I have drawn on these works as well.

Listening to the Data

After a holistic analysis of the written reflections, I identified major trends in the data and several candidates for interviews during the second phase of the research. From the list of nineteen volunteers, I ultimately chose two men and three women to interview. Of these, one of the men identified himself as white, the other as Indian. Two of the women identified themselves as white, and the third—a citizen of Israel—was born of citizens of the United States living in Israel.[42]

When selecting these five students, I looked for students who seemed to express positions representative of the range of data in the written reflections.[44] I also looked for students who wrote at least an average quantity, both narrating and analyzing their experiences of silence to generate a depth of data during the second phase. Finally, I wanted the sample to represent the class demographics as accurately as possible. Given my skepticism about the generalizations that have emerged from much that has been written about student silence, I did not

design this study to provide conclusive data about gender or race. Nor do I believe it is possible to do so. Looking for and believing we have found "the answer" to student silence lead us to view students reductively and to teach prescriptively. Instead, this study aims to ask new questions about student silence and to reframe interpretations in a conscientious, deliberate way by understanding the broad scope of students' concerns.

I was interested in exploring the frameworks that students themselves use to understand their own experiences. With both the student journals and interviews, I conducted inductive analysis in order to understand what themes and patterns would emerge from the data. What meanings do *they* construct for these experiences? What patterns and themes emerge from an extended consideration of the stories of so-called quiet students? In *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, Michael Quinn Patton argues that "inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge from the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis."[45] Unlike Patton, I do not argue that such patterns exist without a pattern maker: the researcher herself is always implicated in constructing meaning through the categories and themes she identifies. In order to minimize those issues I might deem "important" to a discussion of silence (such as race, gender, class, "resistance," absence, silencing, etc.) and to emphasize quiet students' constructions, my coding and analysis began with what Patton calls "indigenous concepts,"[46] those terms participants use to describe their experiences. I first identified the terms and ideas that appeared repeatedly in students' reflections and then grouped related terms.[47] The nine major categories were: (1) "comfort" with other students; (2) "comfort" with teachers; (3) subject-related concerns; (4) classroom practices (inhibiting or encouraging speaking); (5) "internal" reasons; (6) alternate constructions of silence (including references and discussions where silence was not seen as problematic); (7) environmental factors (such as the time of day); (8) "difference"; and (9) references I could not otherwise categorize (including reflections that did not address the questions and issues of the study). Here it seems critical to acknowledge that those terms and categories I brought to the study (focusing on silencing, absence, hostility, etc.) emerged quite infrequently in students' accounts. The category "difference" appears in the accounts almost entirely as a result of specific questions I posed, generally during the final interviews with the focal students. Likewise, I anticipated a wealth of stories about resistance to teachers or texts prompting student silence, as much of our teacherly storytelling would suggest—these were conspicuously absent.

My analysis of the interviews initially took place through case studies. As Patton argues, "The [purpose of the] case study approach to qualitative analysis is to gather comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about each case of interest."[48] This structurally reinforced my commitment to listen to the particular voices that often get erased in teachers' and theorists' constructions of quiet

students. Robert E. Stake delineates three types of case studies: the intrinsic, the instrumental, and the collective.[49] My analysis of the interviews was a hybrid of the first two variations, undertaken for a deeper understanding of the particular cases in order to provide further insight into the issue of student silence, theoretical constructions of the phenomenon, and pedagogical strategies as well.

However, my attention to these individual stories and particular constructions was not an end in itself. While I was concerned with investigating the experiences of each student, I also wanted to provide a more macro-view of the classroom. After a systematic exploration of the individual cases, I read thematically across the five case studies in order to offer a new (if not unified) perspective on student silence. How much time students spent on a particular theme, the richness and complexity of those reflections, and often students' conscious prompting highlighted the relative importance of particular issues in students' complex negotiations about speaking and silence.[50] To borrow a term from Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, "centers of gravity" and links between the categories emerged, and I began to hear student silence in a new way.

Finally, I returned to my teaching journal and to the written reflections of the entire class to consider any additional insights or reflections on what emerged as students' key issues or concerns. Ultimately I chose to include in this text not only the voices of the focal students but those of all students in the class in the ways they addressed the central questions I set out to explore.

Originally I had envisioned this book as a series of case studies. Each chapter would develop a portrait of an individual student as well as a distinct question or issue relating to the questions I posed about speaking and silence in the composition classroom. In this way, readers might come to see these students in the ways that I had known them. However, in looking at the data, this plan seemed less practicable. First, all students spoke at length about multiple issues they considered in the classroom, making it virtually impossible to select a single focus for each. Their reflections frequently overlapped, providing me with interesting avenues to explore in the subtle variations among their reflections. Simply put, case studies would prove reductive and repetitive, as my students' reflections were far more complicated and interrelated than I had anticipated. Further, on a philosophical level, I was concerned that case studies might lead to the conclusion that the concerns and reflections of these students were individual, isolated, and idiosyncratic, thus more easily dismissed. Instead of following a case study format, I centered my analysis on the questions students ask themselves when considering their decisions to speak or to be silent. In the following chapters, you will hear a profusion of voices, without necessarily developing a picture of individual students. Ultimately, I decided this slightly less satisfying exchange would have to suffice: while you might not see Edward, Catarina, Lucy, Sarah, and Sanjay with the clarity I do, you will hear the chorus their voices make—together.

Why Listen?

Brodkey argues, "The only way to fight a hegemonic discourse is to teach ourselves and others alternative ways of seeing the world."[51] It is in this assertion that I see the value and significance of my study. The critique raised by interrupting the authoritative stories we teachers and theorists tell through considering quiet students' experience of the classroom will, I hope, work to transform the theoretical and pedagogical understandings that underlie our disciplinary constructions of student silence. In Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss's terms, I believe my project will help in the development of a "grounded theory" about our classrooms and our quiet students.

Chapter Outlines

In the next chapter, I examine a selection of teaching narratives and draw on a range of theorists for a discussion of how we in the field of composition have come to conceptualize student silence primarily in negative terms. In part, this will draw on the work of composition scholars. However, for a more fully articulated, more carefully nuanced understanding of silence, I also consider other discourses and other fields of study to complicate the picture we have drawn of classroom dialogue and student silence. My effort here is to establish what our shared interpretations of student silence are, as well as what issues and preoccupations in composition pedagogy these interpretations point to.

　　In chapter 3, I present an autoethnographic study of my own history of silences, particularly those academic silences that strike me now as both turning points personally and as crucial experiences shaping my perspectives as a teacher and a researcher. My own history as a student is marked by striking changes in relation to speaking and silence in the classroom: shifting from an eager, highly verbal student in my elementary school years, through many incarnations to my current position as someone who is most likely often perceived as "silent." In this chapter, I trace out what prompted each of these evolutions and the effects these had on my school life. I have several purposes here. First, I believe these experiences profoundly shape my current practices as a teacher and in turn shape my students' experiences. Likewise, I believe these constructions shape my agenda in this project: I find myself personally committed to fighting against the community wisdom about what it means to be a "quiet" student. As Gesa Kirsch claims in her exploration of feminist methodology:

> The goal of situating ourselves in our work and acknowledging our limited perspectives is not to overcome these limits—an impossible task—but to reveal to readers how our research agenda, political commitments, and personal motivations shape our observations in the field, the conclusions we draw, and the research reports we write.[52]

With Kirsch, I believe the exploration of my relationship to this research is an ethical decision. In this process, I acknowledge the ways that my own experiences and identity shape my work; likewise, I engage in the same sorts of reflections—which are often difficult—that I asked my participants for.

The very brief chapter 4 contextualizes the student reflections in the second half of the book. This chapter serves as a reference for readers—offering a profile of the student population where the study took place, introductions to the five focal students, and an overview of the College Writing course in which this study took place.

Chapters 5 and 6 investigate students' sense of classroom silence as problematic and consider the implications for writing (particularly in chapter 6). This interpretation generally centers on the sense that they are not meeting a teacher's requirements. Using the data from students' written reflections and the series of interviews with five students, I explore in chapter 5 my students' visions of the influence of teachers and particular pedagogies on their decisions to speak or to be silent. Often, teaching practices designed to "empower" students and invite their speaking (calling on students, requirements) are seen as problematic, intensifying the pressures that students experience. Students suggest that they are more encouraged to speak by what they perceive as "smaller gestures": the cultivation of teacher-student relationships, a teacher's presentation of "self," and focused attention on how questions are asked and responded to. For these students, such efforts positively alter the dynamics of power, knowledge, and authority in the classroom.

But there are limits to a teacher's influence on classroom dynamics. As I explore in chapter 6, more critical for many of these quiet students are the intersections between identity and community. For example, many cite the "openness" of the community and the ways that speaking invites public evaluation of one's response and intelligence, even one's identity. This is problematic, but not because these students fear conflict or want to avoid disagreement. (Indeed, several enjoy debate-style situations.) Rather, they perceive the interactions in classes as demanding risky self-revelation, often in anonymous communities that do not have "real" conversations. In composition classes where student writing is often a central text of the course, speaking is even more loaded. Thus these quiet students are very conscious of the lessons about voice and audience we try to teach in writing classes.

The final chapter investigates alternative constructions to understand classroom silence, both in our professional discourse and in these students' stories. Most significant in this chapter is the communal sense that silence is not necessarily problematic. As one student says, "It's not a crime to be quiet." For many, silence might be understood more accurately as a learning style, an opportunity for intellectual work through "internal dialogue." Silence can invite

students to weigh competing positions, construct theories and arguments that reflect their values, and put into words that which does not feel already articulated. For one student I interviewed, silence allows her to consider how her responses might fit into the "academic conversation" and to translate from her home language, particularly for those concepts and ideas that have no direct translations. Thus for these students, silence is the space of engagement.

Throughout the text, I offer implications and considerations for a grounded theory of teaching. This research suggests several concrete pedagogical issues to consider: creating a range of speaking situations, including small groups and lower-stakes "real conversations"; devoting greater attention to the development of the classroom community; and providing more opportunities for reflective silence within our classes. But it also points to several areas for further investigation. It is not enough to say we will study *about* silence in classrooms; we must also explore it *with* our classes. Working alone, there is little opportunity for growth. Teachers create requirements, and students may comply or resist or resent or misunderstand these expectations. But a critical dialogue about a teacher's values and expectations and her students' experiences and perspectives invites a more complete vision—an expansion of the ways we think about each other, our classrooms, and the value of silence.