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Passivity: True or False? Fact or Opinion?

Lucia Eldon

"I don't have a day off to work on this mid-term until Sunday," said a student to me. "Plus, I have two other papers that are due this week. Could I have another extension?" I have often wondered when my students sit quietly in class with only a few becoming a part of the discussion or work of the class, whether it might be the passivity of television or the passivity of our educational system that causes passivity in some college students. But then I hear about how very active they are outside of the class, and I realize that they are probably just passive about their role in the classroom, partly due to expectations and partly due to training. Unfortunately, if students are passive, teachers often do things unwittingly to contribute.

Like college students, children are incredibly active, but some critics believe that television can increase inactivity. According to Daniel R. Anderson, Professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, and researcher and author of the article "Education Television Is Not An Oxymoron," the critics of television say that it induces an involuntary attention and that this kind of attention "produces a receptive and inactive mode of cognition fundamentally different from the kind of active cognitive reflection essential for the healthy intellectual development of children" (2). The critics use this concept of involuntary attention or "reflexive" attention to imply that children don't have control over themselves. One of these critics is Marie Winn, who has written several books on tele-

vision as a form of addiction, positing that it "induces passivity" (Anderson 2). However, that is not how children watch shows like "Sesame Street," Professor Anderson argues. He says that research studies show that children are actually

intellectually active when they watch television; they selectively attend to aspects of program content that they find potentially comprehensible and interesting, ignoring those parts that are uninteresting...Children talk to each other about the meaning and reality of television programs; they make predictions...ask questions of adults and other siblings. (Anderson 2,5)

It seems that what is critical is how we perceive children and how they are responding to the material presented. If we see them as passively receiving information and "reflexively bound to the television screen by frantic visual movement and frequent scene changes . . . associated with a passive state of cognition," as do Marie Winn, and Jane Healy, and other critics say they are, then we see that they can only be passive (Anderson 3). If we see that they are selective in their participation, then we can see Anderson's alternate idea that they are indeed quite active. Education reformer Paulo Freire would agree. He believes that teachers can see students as "passive entities" being filled up by "deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute

true knowledge" (57). If this is the case, then we will believe that they are passively watching television or passively sitting in class. If we see instead that they are making choices—selecting the things that they want to attend to, ignoring the rest, talking to siblings or students—then we can see that they are participating in “active cognitive reflection” (Anderson 2). Friere believes that information needs to be related to the reality of the students. He says, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (53). As we can perceive children and students in different ways—passive or active—we can also understand knowledge in different ways.

In the speed of the information age, the difference may be what Oberlin environmental studies professor David Orr suggests as slow knowledge and fast knowledge (Spayde 47). Fast knowledge is like the quick bits of information to be used and forgotten that can be obtained on television and sometimes in the classroom. Slow knowledge is contextual, connected to the environment and culture and “does not imply lethargy, but rather thoroughness and patience” (47). Author of “Learning in the Key of Life” Jon Spayde agrees with Freire and Orr when he pushes for a mixture of self-education and formal education. He believes education should be reflective and come out of a connection with the real world. According to K. Patricia Cross, Professor of Higher Education at the University of California at Berkeley, “Passive learning is an oxymoron.” In other words, if learning is taking place, it is by definition active. She agrees with both Anderson and Friere: “Learners must actively construct their own knowledge; it cannot be given to them, no matter how hard we try . . . Knowledge is . . . not universal and absolute. It is local and historically changing. We construct it and reconstruct it, time after time, and build it up in layers” (14,18). So learning and thinking go on but not in ways that we always expect and not about the things that we expect. And not always when we think—not necessarily in neat semester blocks, as UCLA

Professor Mike Rose illustrates with his student Concepcion who drops out of school after getting on academic probation and then after two years becomes a very successful student (44). Students often will tell me that they understand what we were doing after the semester is over; when they say that they are reading and writing (and sometimes even discussing) differently, then we can know that they are using it in their own world.

Part of the problem with the accusation of students being passive is that teachers are overly active.

Part of the problem with the accusation of students being passive is that teachers are overly active. Teachers are tying too many shoelaces. Kindergarten teacher Mary Jane Blasi believes that by the time children she studied got to the second grade, they were already preoccupied with producing the right answer, they expressed their feelings less, and they recognized connections less between stories and their own experiences (2). In other words, they made fewer connections between material and their own lives. She supports her classroom research with other studies, including one study which found that “children most often restricted their class participation to listening” (2). She cites researcher John Goodlad who found that “teachers outtalked the entire class of students by a ratio of approximately 3 to 1.” Having students “restricted” to listening is seen as a very negative activity in the case of kindergarteners, but a very positive one as students approach junior high and high school. And then when they reach college, we want them to be actively participating in our discussions. Some students learn by listening; one of my dyslexic students at Mid-Michigan Community College told me that she mainly listens to lectures because she cannot write things down at the same time and has a difficult time in learning several chapters of a text at one time. However, other students must talk in order to learn. As a matter of fact, in some cases students can only learn if they talk—whether it be to the teacher or to other stu-

dents. Notice what happens in the case of small children watching ‘Sesame Street’: they talk about it with others. This is how Professor Anderson, in fact, identified whether they were thinking about the material.

Of course, both speaking and listening seem to be critical for success in school, but listening is more difficult to assess. In an interdisciplinary humanities course I teach, we give an oral final exam, designed by my colleague Barry Alford. Students are given a question, I leave the classroom for a class period, the students discuss and debate the answer, and then one person’s name is drawn to give their answer in the next class period. After she gives the answer, I ask if there is anything anyone would like to add, which they always do since everyone receives the same grade. The missing elements of her answer are then provided by other classmates. They listen because it matters.

In on-line classrooms, the idea of participation by listening must help us to reframe what we mean by both of them. Students in my on-line literature course respond both to the literature and to other students on the discussion board. In order to pass the class, they must participate by saying things to the class; in order to participate, they need to read/listen to what others are saying. Often “live” literature classes become dominated by either silence or by a few voices—mine or those that are very confident about speaking up. In the on-line learning community, there is time for reflection before commenting, and often those that would not participate in a traditional way do when people are not staring at them or judging them, as they often feel. In order to challenge the connections we make about speaking as participating, having a web component in regular classes like a chat room or discussion forum can give ourselves and our students ways to rethink what accounts for active participation.

Silence doesn’t always mean there is cognition, but neither does speaking. The engagement may not be in ways that we ordinarily consider learning. Further, if we separate teaching

and learning into roles of “a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)” as Freire describes, then “the contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified” (52). Silence doesn’t guarantee there is listening going on either, although we often consider them the same. Listening is not necessarily passive, but we often regard speaking as active and listening as passive. Pat Belanoff concludes in this way in her recent essay “Silence: Reflection, Literacy, Learning, and Teaching”:

Silence (inhabited by meditation, reflection, contemplation, metacognition, and thoughtfulness) provides one lens through which to see the interlace of literacy; action (response, conversation) provides another lens, but both lenses are pointed at exactly the same object, which continuously turns on itself with no discernible beginning or ending. (422)

Is listening considered silence and a more passive activity? Many of us would consider this to be the case. If we are watching/listening to television, that could be seen as passive. In a classroom, whoever is speaking is the one who is seen as being the active one. We need to question our assumptions about how we see learning to be manifested. The question might not be “how can I get my students to participate more in class discussion?” (in other words, how can I get them to speak up more); rather, we could ask in what multiple ways can we learn and participate and contribute—taking into consideration Deborah Tannen’s work on gender and ethnicity and participation, considering age and personality differences, and learning style differences—as students and as teachers—taking turns.

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