

**The Phenomenology of Silence:**  
**Educing Learning and Creativity In the Classroom**

**Education:**

*An interdisciplinary perspective*

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## ABSTRACT:

Primary indicators reveal that the educational system in the United States is failing in its mission. Academic performance in the U.S. has fallen from second place in the world in the 1950's to seventeenth place in 2012. (Huffington, 2013.)<sup>1</sup> The attrition rate of new teachers within the first five years is nearly fifty percent and growing, resulting in an acute shortage of experienced educators. (Ingersoll, 2012.)<sup>2</sup> School violence, some of it catastrophic, has become a familiar occurrence. (CDC Youth Violence Protection.)<sup>3</sup> Student dropout rates are in excess of thirty percent in low income communities. Cheating scandals have upended entire school districts, (Severson, 2011.)<sup>4</sup> Public and private schools are closing, forcing students to relocate to unfamiliar areas. (Keen, 2013.)<sup>5</sup>



The breakdown in the American educational system can be attributed to a variety of issues--sociological, economic, and even health-related.

Unfortunately, the introduction of standardized rubrics and nation-wide initiatives ("No Child

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<sup>1</sup> Huffington Post. *Education Olympics: How Does America Rank Compared To Other Countries? (INFOGRAPHIC)* July 7, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/27/education-olympics-how-do\\_n\\_1707968.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/27/education-olympics-how-do_n_1707968.html) (Accessed July 2013)

<sup>2</sup> Ingersoll, Richard. *Forbes Magazine Blog*. May 16, 2012. [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/16/kappan\\_ingersoll.h31.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/16/kappan_ingersoll.h31.html) (Accessed June 2013)

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Understanding School Violence*, 2012. <http://www.cdc.gov/violencepreventionUnderstanding> (Accessed July 20, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Severson, Kim. *A Scandal of Cheating, And a fall from Grace*, *New York Times*, September 7, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/08/us/08hall.html?ref=us&r=0> . (Accessed July 20, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Keen, Judy. *Chicago School Closings Ignite Furor and Fears*, *USA Today*, March 29, 2013. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/28/fears-of-gang-fights-cloud-chicago-school-closings/2029411/> . (Accessed July 20, 2013).

Left Behind" and "Race to the Top"), have not addressed root causes. Thus, they often serve to exacerbate the problems they seek to remedy. Understandably, many administrators, teachers, parents, as well as students, feel disempowered to meaningfully reform their individual and collective lives.

Is there any good news? In fact, yes. The clues lie in our history and in ourselves.

The word education derives from the term *educere*: "to lead or draw forth; bring out, or develop from a latent (hidden) condition." (Oxford Dictionary of Etymology.)<sup>6</sup> To "educere" creativity and learning is to empower students to participate in the educational process.

For over two thousand years, great teachers changed the world because they *educated* greatness from their students: Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believes in me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do." (John 14:12.); Socrates attempted to reduce cognitive 'clutter' through a method of reflection (dialogical and dialectical); Descartes endeavored to suspend all of his school learning by silencing its subliminal voice; Kant jettisoned the contaminated uses of pure reason; In John Dewey's 20th century Pragmatic attempt to reform education, he rejected the common notion that the knowledge relation is "ubiquitous" (in his *Essays in Experimental Logic*)<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, Dewey recognized that students thrive in an environment in which they have the opportunity to engage authentically and creatively--that is, experimentally--with the subject matter. "Were all

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<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Etymology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Dewey, John. *Essays in Experimental Logic* University of Chicago Press; Third Impression edition Chicago 1920.

instructors to realize that the *quality* of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth, something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked.” (Dewey, 2008.)<sup>8</sup>

In every case the traditional teacher-student hierarchy dissolves into a condition of dynamic interactivity that generates a wholly different environment. Learning is *educated*.

But how do we access the unique capacities of any individual human being, whether a student, teacher or parent? How do we help students activate their own thinking processes? How do we release *innate* intelligences rather than merely impose information from without? The answer is simple, and yet commonly overlooked: *silence*.

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. Wilder Publications, Radford, VA, 2008.

## Silence, Reflection and Metacognition: Decongestion of the Teaching/Learning

### Experience

“Silence is not simply the absence or opposite of sound or communication; it is an intrinsic part of any acoustic or communication system. Silence is thus a basic part of any culture.” (Miller, 1986.)<sup>9</sup>

In the context of learning, silence is the individual’s retreat from outer stimuli. As we disengage from the external world, we become cognizant of the conscious and sub-conscious mind. Silence makes possible the awareness of the inner processes of cognition and is the foundation for reflective thinking.

While all species are born with a capacity for intelligence that serves their survival and evolutionary needs, man alone has crossed the threshold into reflective thought. This capacity makes human beings superior to all other species. (Teilhard de Chardin, 1955, 165.)<sup>10</sup> Reflection is the power of consciousness to turn in upon itself and become self-aware; aware of not only the content of thought, but the thinking process itself. Awareness of one’s cognitive processes is called *metacognition*.

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, Wreford. *Silence in the Contemporary Soundscape*. University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University. 1993. [http://wfae.proscenia.net/library/articles/miller\\_thesis.pdf](http://wfae.proscenia.net/library/articles/miller_thesis.pdf) (Accessed June 15, 2013)

<sup>10</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. “Reflection” (p165) *Phenomenon of Man.*, Harper and Rowe, NY, 1955.

Despite this evolutionary advantage of silence and metacognition modern educational systems overlook the critical importance of reflection. Teachers and administrators rely upon conventional hierarchies and traditional pedagogical approaches that avoid these elements of the human experience. Students' innate evolutionary gifts are denied. This is a chronic defect in our contemporary school system.

In a society still under the influence of the Industrial Revolution, where speed and efficiency are the benchmarks of success, the goal is to expedite the delivery of 'correct' information. In this context, modern education tends to use silence as a mechanism for control. Thus, students tend to harbor negative connotations in relationship to the experience of silence and reflection. Silence is a condition often imposed upon them for punitive reasons.

For the modern learner, another additional and significant obstacle to silence and reflection is the dependence upon, and even addiction to, technology. As far back as 1977, studies in the United States revealed the damaging effects of excessive television viewing on the mental and physical health of children. According to Miller "Enforced continuity [of stimulus] is grounds for confusion and dysfunctional memory....finally leading to alienation from oneself." (Miller, 1993.)<sup>11</sup> For example, extended viewing of television (more than two hours per day) has been linked to such conditions as poor verbal skills, the inability to focus (ADD and

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<sup>11</sup> Miller, Wreford. *Silence in the Contemporary Soundscape*. University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University. 1993. [http://wfae.proscenia.net/library/articles/miller\\_thesis.pdf](http://wfae.proscenia.net/library/articles/miller_thesis.pdf) (accessed June 15, 2013)

ADHD), poor posture, suppressed development of the imagination and a disinclination to read. (Winn, 1977, 8.)<sup>12</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is estimated that teenagers are exposed to as much as twelve hours of stimulus per day from an array of technology including i-phones, computers, televisions and video games. The result is an insatiable quest to be entertained, to interact remotely, to be visually excited in a virtual world. In some cases, the modern student is overloading him or herself with enough sensory input to provoke such extreme responses as PTSD and hearing damage. School systems are struggling to contain the epidemic of technology-based stimulus.

### **“Stillness to Greatness”**

In my work with students over the past thirty-six years, I have been consistently fascinated by the qualities of human resilience and ingenuity. Even amidst the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, these inner resources are available to everyone regardless of age, gender, perceived physical and mental ‘capacities’, or family and social backgrounds. With this perspective, I have been able to elude creative engagement from even the most reluctant learner. In doing so, I’ve debunked the myth of the so-called ‘bad student,’ an underlying belief that prevails in our schools. Consequently, a new paradigm of education is born that, when

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<sup>12</sup> Winn, Marie. *The Plug-In Drug. Television, Children and the Family*. Penguin Books Canada, New York, 1977.

implemented, consistently generates a positive and progressive teaching and learning experience for everyone.

The ground of my pedagogical approach lies in silence and reflection. Silence and reflection slow down the thinking process. 'Thinking' takes time: thinking *through* time is punctuated by moments of generative silence and imagination. When thinking slows, awareness of our perceptual and cognitive experience (metacognition) emerges. This is foundational to critical thinking, inquiry and learning. (Senge, 2000, 69.)<sup>13</sup> Essential to higher order thinking, metacognition provides a pathway to learning agency. Interestingly, student agency, when activated, brings the teacher and student closer together. They find themselves engaging naturally in a *mutual* experience of authentic inquiry.

The spectrum of brain-wave states that is optimal for learning range between alpha frequencies and lower beta (slower than the fight and flight stimulus threshold). Silence and reflection slow the brain wave frequency down to rates between 8 and 12 Hz/sec—an alpha pattern. This induces calming neuro-chemicals, which aid in higher order thinking. (Harris, 2002, 22.)<sup>14</sup> Students skilled in metacognition can consciously change their learning (brainwave) states. The ability to shift one's internal brainwave function is a potent tool for overcoming common classroom maladies, such as boredom or even the fear of failure. Students find themselves uniquely empowered and self-aware.

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<sup>13</sup> Senge, Peter; *Schools That Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education*. Doubleday, Random House Inc., New York, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, Bill. ("Brain wave states" p. 22) *Thresholds of the Mind, Your Personal Roadmap to Success, Happiness and Contentment*; Centerpointe Press. Beaverton, Oregon, 2002.



Hundreds of student surveys (Appendix 1), which I've conducted at the high school level, support modern research. (Grosswald, 2011.)<sup>15</sup> They indicate that silence, reflection and metacognition help the learner manage stress and think more clearly. Some students have stated that silence was 'the highlight of their day.' After a period of silence, the majority of students noted that they experienced readiness to learn, and had increased energy within themselves, while in the classroom there was significantly more respect, harmony and a sense of safety. Greater than ninety-five percent of students perceived that silence positively impacts the class climate. This is true, even for those students who claim that silence has little or no positive impact on them personally: "It feels like all of us are one whole...in my other classes [that do not practice silence] we are like animals and I find it hard to concentrate."

The experience of silence—for student and teacher alike—generates an ideal ground for intellectual curiosity and creativity. As teachers *and* students develop metacognitive skills (there are generally two components of metacognition: knowledge about cognition, and regulation of cognition) through silence and reflection, the traditional teacher-student hierarchy dissolves. The assumption of superiority ascribed to the teacher is displaced by a collective curiosity and desire to understand and refine knowledge. This is the art of educating multiple intelligences from all involved to serve the process of learning. This constitutes a radical departure from the authoritarianism implicit in our school structures, which implies

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<sup>15</sup> Grosswald, Sarina. *Mind and Brain Journal of Psychiatry*. M&B 2011; 2(1). New York, July 2011.

teacher infallibility and the assumption that educational content is complete and cannot be improved upon, let alone by the students themselves! (Perkinson, 1971, 19.)<sup>16</sup>

My pedagogical approach is titled, “Stillness to Greatness (STG®).” Wherever I have introduced my methods to administrators and teachers—in workshops, in-class modeling sessions, and individual coaching—the responses were enthusiastic. Teachers were relieved, at last, to be learning effective tools for managing the classroom: “Please consider exposing other teachers to these methods. This could honestly change our whole school environment. These skills will benefit our students for a lifetime.” (cf. Appendix 2, Educator Testimonials.)

The Stillness to Greatness program has yielded striking results. For example, when students with diverse learning needs engaged in the STG process, the divisions between “good” and “bad” students dissolved into an experience of relaxed collaboration and motivation. As the classroom atmosphere changed, individual students underwent significant transformations. An embittered and withdrawn sophomore from a broken home started to participate and make effort. His grades quickly improved. A shy African American girl, struggling with test anxiety, expressed her fears to me and to the entire class, catalyzing a conversation among us all. As a result, I shifted my testing policy. A fidgety student diagnosed with ADHD sat calmly and attentively – a model of equanimity. When introduced to the STG methodology, an unruly senior who was on probation for arson, lingered after class. Quietly, he confided, “This is the

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<sup>16</sup> Perkinson, Henry J. “Infallibility of knowledge” (p19) *The Possibilities of Error: An Approach to Education*. David MacKay Company Inc., New York, 1971.

first thing that has ever made sense to me at school.” An accomplished A-student expressed gratitude for the opportunity to reflect and refresh before her math lesson began.

One afternoon, two girls burst into the room, swearing angrily at each another. The entire class was unnerved. I requested that the girls look out of the window, which they did. As I guided their attention away from each other and directed it to the wind blowing through the trees, they fell into a silent meditation along with the rest of the class. Afterwards, one of girls remarked that she could not remember what they had been fighting about.

In the human experience, learning moves in two directions – from outside to inside, and from inside to outside. (Roemischer, 2012.)<sup>17</sup>Traditional pedagogy defaults to the former. The teacher is conceived of as the agent whose role is to make the student ‘complete’ or ‘accomplished’ through the imparting of knowledge. At the collective or societal level, this framework generates a culture of authoritarianism; at an individual level it promotes a fear of failure.

In contrast, STG operates in both directions simultaneously. Silence and reflection reveal that which is *within* the learner—his or her innate qualities and values. There is no presumed notion that something is missing or in need of completion. Rather a student is seen in the light of his or her inherent wholeness and self-mastery. STG *educes* these qualities as the foundation

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<sup>17</sup> Roemischer, Jessica; The Duet Paradigm – *The Quantum Result of Empowering Women with Disabilities*; (p7) Oxford Round Table: *Women in History: Against All Odds*, Oxford Round Table, 2012

for authentic inquiry. The result: STG mitigates and, in many cases, dissolves the fragmented experience most students associate with the learning process – a root cause of anxiety and failure.

A valuing of students' innate capacities ignites a *remedial process*, dissolving anxiety and bringing students together in a cohesive field of interest and effort. When students and teachers experience a unified field of learning, the virtue of *effort* is valued more than the status of *ability*. This engenders a feeling of safety in all students, even for those with diverse needs, giving everyone in the classroom scope and confidence to take academic risks, including the teacher!

Just as teachers so often fail to recognize or value students' innate intelligences, in the same way, educational reform ("No Child Left Behind," etc.) has been hastily imposed from the top down, usurping teacher creativity and agency. These initiatives, rather than successfully addressing core issues, often lead to a school environment in which teachers feel disempowered. The result: teacher despondency is passed onto students. On the other hand, Stillness to Greatness methodologies empower teachers as dynamic agents within their classrooms, liberating their attention from the preoccupation with pedagogical and curriculum rubrics to the open-ended process of learning.

John Dewey describes reflective thought as being essential to intelligence, as it “transforms a situation in which there is an experience of obscurity, doubt, conflict, and disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious.” (Strathern, 2002, 65.)<sup>18</sup> STG creates a shift of perspective from the forces of expectation from without, to the embrace of inner cognitive processes. The ability to shift allegiance from outer to inner, propels both teacher and student into open-minded exploration.

Physicist and philosopher Milic Capek provides a phenomenology of silence in his call for “a more adequate and flexible form of thought devoid of symbolism and appropriate to the content of modern physics.” He suggests that such a change will not be found from the continuum of current thought, but only through a new emergence. (Capek, 1961.)<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it has become clear to me that, just as stars and galaxies are born in the dark matter of space, original thought is born from silence.

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<sup>18</sup> Strathern, Paul. *Dewey in 90 Minutes*. Ivan R Dee Press, Chicago, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Capek, Milic. *Philosophical Impact of Contemporary Physics*. D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., Toronto, 1961.

## APPENDIX 1

### Student Responses

*In other classes that do not practice silence there is more chaos. Being silent helped me slow down my thoughts and think twice about problems in class.*

*In a class that uses silence it is much quieter and the students are less jumpy. Students are calmer towards each other. It helps me focus because I am calmer.*

*Normally the teachers jam-pack as much work as they can for a class. But here, we take a few moments to focus/regroup. It's helpful to let go for a few minutes and then get into math.*

*I cannot thank you enough for helping me learn meditation. I use it all the time and will continue to use it. My stress level is very low since meditation.*

*Many kids had a hard time sitting still because we are used to being rushed as a student. Silence has helped everyone in this room to deal with stress in a healthier way.*

*Without meditation the class is antsy, loud and obnoxious. Students are not serious and treat each other with disrespect. In here we focus more and the teacher is more alert but very relaxed... something my other teachers should learn.*

*What I enjoyed most from silence was how positive and relaxed the atmosphere of the class is. There was no pressure between us.*

*Meditation does not work for me, but it worked for the classroom. It made things smoother and let people calm down so they can learn in a calm mood.*

*Mr. Carroll has multiple methods to make learning fun and easier for students and they are methods that you can use in other classes as well. I think that other students would agree with me that Mr. Carroll's unique system of teaching is a lot more effective than an outsider looking in would realize. Mr. Carroll is a prime example of how a good teacher can change a learning experience in an extremely positive way.*

## APPENDIX 2

### Educator Testimonials

*Your insights gave me a fresh perspective on what our kids are experiencing and how best to deal with that. Please consider exposing other teachers to these methods. This could honestly change our whole school environment. These skills would benefit our students for a lifetime.*

*It's hard to put a measurement on the workshop with Lawrence, but I can say that it was the best 6 hours I have spent with my colleagues in the last 20 years. He was able to influence the collective consciousness of the group, and encourages us to try to do the same in the classroom.*

*I really appreciated the fact that we could be honest and vulnerable with each other and will create a support network beyond this workshop.*

*It went really well with the classes! I told them about the conference and how you do meditation with your classes. Three of my four classes asked if we could do it so we started*

*today. Everyone was engaged - even my compulsive talker!! I am amazed at how each student just got into it! Thanks again for the workshop and all the help!*

*Unlike many teachers that leave education (mentally or physically) or lose their membership as real practitioners in the field, Mr. Carroll is confident and determined to help improve the mindsets of educators and the learning environments for our students.*

*Many teachers will agree that the first year can be the toughest and many teachers will not return after their first year. With Lawrence's help and guidance I was able to not just "survive" the first year, but to have a successful first year and come back excited for the second year.*

*Your workshop has given me affirmation of my own teaching practice.*

*If the whole school practiced this we would have less conflict and more in depth learning.*

*The students really enjoy walking into Carroll's classroom. He uses meditation when needed to get the students into the correct frame of mind and body so they are ready to learn. The kids love this and it really promotes a quiet calm environment that is conducive to learning.*

*I am proud and thankful, beyond words, when I think of the transformation in my son's self-confidence, because of the experiences he had in your classroom.*

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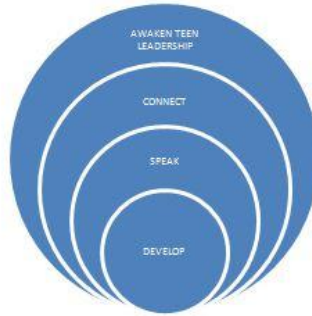
### **About the Presenter**

Lawrence Carroll is an educational consultant, inspirational speaker, workshop facilitator, experienced High School teacher and Certified Life Coach working with teachers, teenagers and parents around the world. He is enabling educators and students to succeed as leaders, pioneers and global citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His innovative methods empower individuals and groups to make a positive difference in themselves and the world. Lawrence seeks opportunities to implement these strategies through ongoing partnerships with school districts, administrators, teachers, parents and students. Additionally, he facilitates new collaborative partnerships that result in the highest outcome for our students. As we all cultivate our most far-reaching ability and interests, we discover new and exciting horizons.

For more information on Lawrence Carroll's work go to:

Website at: [www.AwakenTeenLeadership.net](http://www.AwakenTeenLeadership.net)

Email: [laurie.teacher.coach@gmail.com](mailto:laurie.teacher.coach@gmail.com)



“Years ago the Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. did a study, which discovered that the average teacher lasted about seven years before dropping out of the system – from exhaustion. Lawrence Carroll’s work with teachers and administrators is arguably the most important contribution anyone can make to American educators.” (Dr. John Roemischer – Retired Professor, Department of Education, City University of NY and State University of Plattsburgh)