

Perception, Context, and Silence: Reading John Dewey While Listening to John Cage

Peter J. Nelsen
Appalachian State University

Silence can emerge in surprising places and moments. In the middle of a recent class, I found myself ensconced in silence and unable to respond to a student question. It was a common enough moment: While discussing John Dewey's notion of interaction and its implications for teaching and learning, a student asked: "*Does any of this matter?*" She then quickly added, "*We can't do any of this in the schools around here anyway.*" As I contemplated a response, my personal doorway to silence opened.

My inability to respond rested on my having *too much to say*, too many choices for proceeding. In the words of Ann Diller, I was "torpified."¹ On the surface, the question was reasonable; most of the schools my students enter are dominated by curricular mandates that demand both content and methodological conformity. The question also fit the open and critical discussion space I had been trying to foster. I wanted to encourage my students to think critically, to take nothing at face value, especially the ideas I asked them to consider. At the same time, though, the question seemed dismissive, as indicating that the process of thinking through such difficult ideas was not worth the effort. It signaled our inability to partner, to think together about what I hoped were important ideas. In that moment, I was struck by the importance of the fundamental question hidden in our interchange: About what should we help our students think in order to prepare them for life in contemporary schools?

In this essay, I dive headlong into what I at first considered to be an inadequate response to that challenging question, what at the moment seemed like awkward, deafening silence. Instead of seeing that moment as a failure, though, I argue that it may provide the seeds for a more complex and full response than if I had proceeded in perhaps the expected professorial way: to provide a well-wrought answer that emerges from my philosophical and practical vantage point as the classroom "sage." Rather than considering such a moment of silence to be an absence, I agree with Susan Sontag who argues that it is a fullness that is valuable to encounter itself. But more than an interesting aesthetic notion, in what follows I argue that given the context of contemporary schooling, we have an obligation to help our students develop the capacities and habits associated with attending to silence. To make that argument and its implications clear, I turn both to John Cage's and John Dewey's works. I begin by comparing my classroom situation with John Cage's *4'33"*. I then use Dewey's aesthetic theory as a way to "listen" to Cage. In turn, I use both Cage and Dewey to explore how attending to silence is a necessary component of our efforts to prepare our students to enter contemporary schools.

SILENCE AND THE FRAMING OF CONTEXT: INTRODUCTION TO *4'33"*

Known as the *silent piece*, *4'33"* is perhaps John Cage's most famous or infamous piece, depending on one's response to its challenge. The performer (to date

a pianist, though Cage insists the work could be played on any combination of instruments) sits at a piano for three movements of different lengths without striking a key or making a sound. Because it disrupts and exploits the unspoken code that audiences remain silent during a performance, it shifts our perception from the sounds made by the performer to the audience itself, the ambient sounds of the performance environment, and even the larger space surrounding it.² This is evident in accounts of the original performance in an open-air auditorium in Woodstock, New York on a summer evening in 1952. A brief thunderstorm was framed by each of the movements. Cage described the scene this way: “You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.”³ When performed indoors, the piece emphasizes ambient noises such as shuffling feet, throat clearing, paper rustling, the building’s air conditioning, and external sounds like police sirens. Douglas Kahn argues that Cage deliberately refocused the attention of the audience from that of the musical instrument to these other sounds by using the expectation that the audience “continue to be obedient listeners and not to engage in the utterances that would distract them from shifting their perception toward other sounds.” Doing so, “set into motion the process by which the realm of musical sounds would itself be extended.”⁴

Many in Cage’s audience refused to engage in the way that he demanded; they resisted his shifting the focus onto them and the auditorium’s ambient sounds. Many left in anger. Others since then have decried it and other pieces in Cage’s vast and experimental oeuvre as absurd, as anything but music. Kyle Gann reports one illustrative reaction to a 2004 BBC Orchestra’s performance of *4’33”*: “This is clearly a gimmick. When he ‘wrote’ this piece he was testing who was stupid enough to fall for it.”⁵ Others, of course, have been thoughtfully provoked by *4’33”* (and other of Cage’s works). Gann argues that *4’33”* “led composers to listen to phenomena that would have formerly been considered nonmusical.”⁶

Like the audience members who were confused, shocked, and even outraged by *4’33”* and Cage’s challenge that they reconsider their beliefs about sound events, those of us who teach philosophy of education regularly ask students to reconsider their fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning. We also shift the ground away from learning seemingly outwardly focused methodological tricks and procedures, to a direct encounter with ourselves, our beliefs, and our past experiences. We ask students to consider how our conceptions might not capture all that we can and should think about teaching and learning. Like Cage, we also refuse to provide final answers or neat ways of thinking about education. Instead, we actively invite students to join us in to consider about what *should* be happening in schools. For many, rather than being the inviting challenge that I think we believe it to be, it is a daunting and unwelcome one. Many students react like Cage’s shocked audience: This isn’t what I expected. In order to amplify the implications of thinking about silence with Cage, I now briefly turn to three aspects of Dewey’s aesthetic theory: resistance, perception, and context.

LISTENING TO CAGE WITH DEWEY

Both Dewey and Cage ground aesthetic engagement in challenge. For example, in his discussion of the need for a charged moment to be a requisite component of the artistic experience, Dewey argues that we should cultivate a certain type of engaged resistance: “Resistance that calls out thought generates curiosity and solicitous care, and, when it is overcome and utilized, eventuates in elation.”⁷ Cage, of course, purposefully offered a moment of resistance to his audience. Cage demanded that the audience listen differently and to participate. Those unable, unwilling, or unprepared for such a demand by the artist dismissed the performance as a stunt or silliness. Something failed, then, either on the part of the artist to draw them in, or on the part of the audience to join him in his exploration of sound, silence, and music. Dewey argued that when the perceiver of a work of art does not join the artist actively in seeing, listening, or experiencing the art piece, then the person’s “‘appreciation’ will be a mixture of scraps of learning with conformity to norms of conventional admiration and with a confused, even if genuine, emotional excitation” (*AE*, 56.)

The crucial point here is that the artist undertakes an aesthetic endeavor in order to explore the felt tension itself. It inspires reflection and the need to restore harmony through the act of creation. The artist does not avoid moments of discomfort. Instead they are cultivated, “not for their own sake but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total” (*AE*, 14). Dewey goes on to argue that engaging with a work of art requires an audience to participate actively in the artistic process of inquiry. In this way the listener to 4’33” must surrender to perception, though again, Dewey stresses that it is an *active* surrendering: “Receptivity is not passivity” (*AE*, 54). Indeed, it may be intense:

Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy. To steep ourselves in a subject-matter we have first to plunge into it. When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us and, for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take* in. (*AE*, 55)

This, of course, emphasizes that for Dewey, engaging with a work of art in this way is an aspect of inquiry. The key to listening to Cage’s piece with Dewey, then, is to inquire into the fullness of the silence that Cage forefronts. Putting oneself in the presence of art, to silence oneself in order to listen to silence itself in this case, is an aspect of an active inquiry process that seeks *answers* to questions while seeking to restore the inquirer’s inner harmony.

Context, of course, is vital in Deweyan inquiry, and it is no less so for aesthetic inquiry.⁸ While Dewey is sympathetic to our tendency to forget how much the context matters, he argues that attending to context nevertheless remains vital. It is “no mere fringe. It has a solidity and stability not found in the focal material of thinking.”⁹ Attending to context, of course, is a prime aim of 4’33”. By not playing music, by focusing on silence, Cage turns our attention from the stage to the ambient sounds that are usually ignored when listening to a performance. The key here is that the performance itself provides a structure to push the audience to attend to what is

already there.¹⁰ Furthermore, Noël Carroll argues this framing imparts a semantic function onto the ambient sounds; they represent more than they would if heard outside the boundaries of the performance.¹¹

Cage, then, teaches us two primary lessons. First, silence already exists, but it is more than the absence of expected sound. It is an already existing fullness, or in the words of Max Picard: “The absence of language simply makes the presence of Silence more apparent. Silence is an autonomous phenomenon. It is therefore not identical with the suspension of language.”¹² As a result, we should not think of silence as an absence. “Silence is, on the contrary, a positive, a reality.”¹³ Cage also teaches us, pace Dewey, that in order to listen, we need to engage with that which may be hidden or otherwise ignored. Of course, in the case of *4'33"* he moves what may normally reside in the background from being unnoticed to the front and center of our consciousness. Engaging in such a way can be unsettling.

THE PERCEPTION OF SILENCE AND INQUIRY

The moment that launched this discussion was a reasonable and common enough student challenge in class: *Why read this? Why think this way if the context of schooling will prevent us from acting on these ideas?* They are reasonable questions. I will not rehearse a response that outlines the merits of engaging in philosophical inquiry. Moving in that direction misses the point. Instead, the questions point to a need to focus on helping students develop specific capacities to live and respond to the specific challenges created by the details of contemporary schooling. My students emerge from schools that help them think instrumentally about classroom inquiry, and as a result, like Cage's audience, they bring expectations into the classroom that influence how we inquire together. While they would not characterize it as starkly as this, they often assume education courses should begin and end with helping them develop the skills to cover curriculum and raise test scores.

Please do not misunderstand the last statement. I have empathy for their focus on methodological issues. But the instrumentality of current educational thought helps students and teachers bracket their inner lives, interests, and dreams in order to reach pre-ordained goals. It eschews asking expansive questions about human flourishing. It *is* the reality that in order to reach mandated ends, teachers are often required to teach scripted lessons, to follow pacing guides, and to demand that students demonstrate “proficiency” on specific standards using required measurement tools. Such work forces them to attend to that which is valued by the evaluative apparatus. For example, the demand for “evidence based practice” has pushed some local schools to adopt the P.A.L.S. reading approach, one where students and teachers read prescribed scripts while completing worksheets, short readings, and comprehension tests.¹⁴ At no point in the program are unscripted questions or responses to readings allowed. Teachers are not even allowed to acknowledge student frustration with the program. As a result of such measures, teachers have described the current educational environment as being both intellectually barren and emotionally stifling.¹⁵ In addition, current “zero-tolerance” policies require that

teachers participate in the criminalizing of students for minor behavioral infractions, further emphasizing that schooling is increasingly becoming a place where students and teachers feel alienated from any larger sense of purpose than deferring to authority.¹⁶ As one experienced teacher recently reflected:

I came to discover that on several occasions I was engaging in classroom practices not because I thought that they were best for my pupils, but rather because I thought that they were what I was supposed to do. I was acquiescing in teaching practices that felt artificial to me, and I did so primarily out of a sense of deference to the district.¹⁷

With this large context looming around us, we once again return to the question raised by my student: Given these conditions, about what *should* we ask our education students to think?

I suggest that Dewey provides some resources for direction. If we return again to his distinction between recognition and reception, I think it is clear that current schooling leads teachers away from truly attending to or receiving what is happening in their classrooms and the complexities associated with human interaction. Instead, schools delimit spaces in which certain ways of thinking, expressing ideas, questioning, feeling, and responding are deemed valuable while alternative ways of thinking, discordant ideas, and even emotions are outlawed. As a result, teachers are not encouraged to listen deeply to and with their students. They are not helped to attend to the myriad complexities associated with classroom life and important inquiry. In Dewey's words, they are helped to become "wooden" pedagogues (*AE*, 273).

Philosophy of education can offer resources for responding to such deadening conditions. Philosophical inquiry can help students develop the capacities and habits associated with the sort of engaged perception integral to Dewey's discussion of aesthetic inquiry. As Jim Garrison aptly observes, Dewey emphasizes that in an aesthetic experience "it is the capacity to receive, our ability to take in that is crucial."¹⁸ Dewey argues that recognition entails superficial identification, what he describes as using a stencil to understand a complex object. Mandated assessments can function this way; they provide teachers with "bare outlines" with which to view complex people and situations. In contrast, Dewey emphasizes that perception involves ways of seeing that are *fresh and alive*:

This act of seeing involves the cooperation of motor elements even though they remain implicit and do not become overt, as well as cooperation of all funded ideas that may serve to complete the new picture that is forming. Recognition is too easy to arouse vivid consciousness. There is not enough resistance between new and old to secure consciousness of the experience that is had. (AE, 54–55)

Notice that Dewey focuses on the necessity of resistance; it is the beginning on which we build a more complex vision of someone or something. This resistance, then, requires an engaged perception, a "vivid consciousness" that helps us to see more deeply around us. I agree with Garrison who argues that this is crucial for teaching and learning, especially if we wish to attend to the ethical and emotional lives of our students: "It allows us to perceive the needs, desires, interests, wishes, and hopes of others under our care. It involves sympathy. Perception provides the 'data' for creative moral response."¹⁹ It is here that I argue we need to focus as philosophers

of education, to help our students develop capacities that are essential components of philosophical inquiry; we need to help them notice what is happening around them, to focus on the context as well as the content of the pedagogical encounter, especially when it is confusing, difficult, and emotionally challenging.

I am *not* arguing against the value of the work we generally do — that associated with the critical appraisal of educational aims, beliefs, and practices. Instead, I suggest that we amplify an essential aspect of philosophical inquiry — that of attending, focusing on details — not as a simple escape or cure-all for what is happening in schools today. Instead, we can offer something much more modest, but no less profoundly important: the experience of noticing that which is purposefully or unknowingly ignored amidst the deafening loudness of current school practices. As Cage helps us see, these are the sounds, sights, and emotions that already and continue to exist in the classroom — details that emerge amidst and in response to the myriad human interactions that comprise the classroom space.

Furthermore, like Cage, I suggest that silence can be a useful framing device for attending. As such, we can use the direct experience of silence to help develop the habits and capacities to help them notice that which exists but may be ignored in contemporary schools. By this I mean that we should proceed metaphorically and directly. As a metaphor, attending to the myriad background events, sounds, emotions, and so on, should be relatively clear; in many ways, it is part and parcel of philosophical inquiry. I also am suggesting that we should also directly engage students in the immediate experience of sitting with silence as an aspect of inquiry. Of course, that is a difficult task, one that we are not trained to accept or to value in school-based educational contexts. Instead, we are encouraged to move forward, to grow, to find answers. Even when we acknowledge that we as teachers do not have answers, we might be inclined to push forward — engaging students in our quest to find answers. The alternate move I am advocating here, then, is to acknowledge that there may be no clear path forward, no easy or even identifiable move to make. Instead, the move might be to sit silently, to *do nothing actively*.

Cage helps us see that the direct exploration of silence may be facilitated through some sort of framing experience. For example, such inquiry can be framed by simply asking students to notice what arises when they pause to consider a question like the one that tormented me. Rather than responding directly, we can explore what happens if we sit without answering the question directly. What do we notice? What emotions arise? What thoughts? What sounds or images? What notions and questions about schooling emerge?

To be clear, I am not advocating some romantic notion about the simplistic, restorative effects of silent reflection in the classroom. Sitting with silence and *attending* to what sounds, images, emotions, thoughts, and so forth arise is tough work; it requires that those in the community of inquiry remain focused on how this aids inquiry. This requires that students develop the capacity to stay, to remain focused in the midst of adversity and discomfort because *these* often infuse the life of contemporary classrooms. If we take meditation practice as an emblematic

example, we find that the experience of sitting and attending in silence is quite difficult. As the experienced meditation teacher and scholar, Pema Chodron, describes, sitting in silence can be difficult, uncomfortable work:

No matter what comes up — aching bones, boredom, falling asleep, or the wildest thoughts and emotions — we develop a loyalty to our experience. Although plenty of meditators consider it, we don't run screaming out of the room. Instead we acknowledge that impulse as thinking, without labeling it right or wrong. This is no small task. Never underestimate our inclination to bolt when we hurt.²⁰

And this is the heart of the issue I am raising: Rather than helping students master content, pedagogical tricks, or even the details of some philosophic argument, one of the most fundamental capacities philosophy of education can help our education students develop is the ability to attend, to remain engaged with difficult thoughts and emotions.

Despite its potential importance, though, inquiring into silence is complicated because it is thoroughly enmeshed in issues of power, justice, and oppression. As critical pedagogues have long argued, silence is often a contested but important aspect of oppression. Many social justice educators, for example, want the opposite — to provide spaces where those traditionally silenced voices are directly engaged with by those in dominant power positions. As Huey-li Li characterizes it, social justice educators often seek to “silence silences,” that is, to help end oppression in its many guises and help those who have been silenced reclaim a public voice.²¹ But echoing Cage's challenge to listen to what is already there, many theorists have observed that those who seemingly are silenced by oppression are not silent; rather, those who occupy dominant power positions are not listening. Importantly, Li goes on to argue that understanding the dynamics of oppression through the lens of silence can lead one to a mistaken assumption that the silenced, or oppressed, mischaracterizes the dynamic. She argues that:

It follows that a genuine effort to reclaim the silenced voices must acknowledge that the silenced voices are not the absence of speech. Otherwise, the silenced people's reclaiming their silenced voices can simply function as a reassurance of the oppressive power of the dominant group. A truly liberating pedagogy must be based on a conjoint effort to listen to the silences and to reclaim the silenced voices.²²

In our efforts to attend, then, we must not replicate the oppressive power dynamics that we are seeking to disrupt and alter. The important implication is that we cannot *demand* that our students attend to silence in the way that John Cage did in the public performance of *4'33"*. He purposefully did not prepare his audience for the exploration of a difficult moment; while such a move might be an acceptable part of public performance, it is not generally an aspect of collaborative work in teaching and learning. Thus, while I have used Cage's example extensively in this essay to frame our exploration and understanding of silence, I do not advocate the general silencing of students — forcing them to attend. To borrow from Peirce, doing so, I believe, would block the path of inquiry.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize a point that Ann Diller makes in her insightful discussion of becoming one's own philosopher of education: we need to allow ourselves and our students opportunities to become torpified, to embrace the

fullness of silence.²³ As Dewey so often argued, within a social undertaking like teaching and learning, there are myriad threads of interaction always at work within classroom encounters. Becoming torpidified is a receptive mode of participating in inquiry, but it is one that is grounded in active exploration of what I have been describing as silence. The aim is to encounter the “full void, an enriching emptiness” with curiosity, patience, and humbleness.²⁴ I am not implying that such work will necessarily and alone cure the ails of contemporary schooling; necessary reform will require a host of intertwined and complex social and political actions on the part of diverse educational participants. Instead, I am arguing that we can help our students develop the strength and skills associated with attending to the difficult matters that arise as a result of such schooling — to attend to the sounds, feelings, sights, and actions occurring around them in schools — things that are not necessarily valued and highlighted. Despite the view that contemporary schools may morally and intellectually numb teachers and students to the complexities of life around them, attending to the fullness of silence may help us all remain more fully alive, awake and engaged with one another and the richness of human experience in our classrooms.

1. Ann Diller, “Facing the Torpedo Fish: Becoming a Philosopher of One’s Own Education,” in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steve Tozer (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998).

2. Douglas Kahn, “John Cage: Silence and Silencing,” *Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (1997).

3. Cage quoted in Alex Ross, “Searching for Silence: John Cage’s Art of Noise,” *New Yorker*, October 4, 2010, 52.

4. Kahn, “John Cage: Silence and Silencing,” 560.

5. Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage’s 4’33”* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), 15.

6. *Ibid.*

7. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934) (New York: Perigee Books, 2005), 62. This work will be cited as *AE* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 109.

9. Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1931–1932*, vol.6 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 13.

10. Stuart Sim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 112–13.

11. Noel Carroll, “Cage and Philosophy,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 1 (1994).

12. Max Picard, ed., *The World of Silence* (Chicago: Gateway, 1952), xix.

13. *Ibid.*, xx.

14. Robert E. Slavin et al., “Effective Reading Programs for the Elementary Grades: A Best-Evidence Synthesis,” *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 4 (2009).

15. Gail Masuchika Boldt, Paula M. Salvio, and Peter M. Taubman, “Introduction,” in *Bank Street College Occasional Papers Series*, ed. Jonathan G. Silin (New York: Bank Street College of Education, 2009).

16. Elizabeth MacDonald and Dennis Shirley, *The Mindful Teacher* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009).

17. Ibid., 12.
18. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 66.
19. Ibid.
20. Pema Chodron, *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2001), 25.
21. Huey-li Li, "Rethinking Silencing Silences," in *Democratic Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence*, ed. Megan Boler (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).
22. Ibid., 79.
23. Diller, "Facing the Torpedo Fish."
24. Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 2002), 11.