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‘Silence’, the invisible tool of a dialogically extended mind: An email experience of a Kuwaiti tutor in higher education

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Abstract

Silence, within mainstream feminist scholarship, is based on a binary understanding in relation to voice. Silence is demeaned and seen as the unwanted other. As a result, silent women are depicted as powerless and oppressed. In this paper I examine the dynamics of an email episode I experienced with a female student within a Kuwaiti higher education context. Combining Carter’s (2006) views on archival silence and approaching the email event from a dialogically extended mind perspective (Fusaroli, Gangopadhyay & Tylene, 2013) I offer a different understanding of silence. Following an autoethnographic approach to research, I argue that silence needs to be freed from the dichotomous entrapment in order for other meanings to emerge. Focusing on the process of the dialogical interaction within the email context I was able to see how silence plays a role as a tool that dialogically extends the mind. Silence emerges as intersubjective, dialogic and requires collaboration.

1. Introduction

The feminist understanding of silence is plagued with demeaning depictions and is generally recognised as loss of power (Mishra, 2013). Feminists struggle to break silence and give women a voice (Pegis, 2010). Trapped in a binary construct, silence has been diminished and viewed opposite to voice as unwanted other (Solnit, 2017). This dualism prohibits new meanings to emerge; it is premised on 'either/or' approach. In fact, in much Western scholarship a dichotomy is what silence and voice had become where silence is seen as "the theft of voice" (Acheson, 2008, p. 537). Women's images suffer as a result. A silent woman is a powerless woman. And when 'other' 'different' women are in question the images are even more troubling (Mohanty, 2003; Lazreg, 2012).

In this study (a), I initiate a research project which examines one possibility to bring together two almost opposing views on experience; one which asserts the body and feelings and the other which emphasises the mind and externally-derived tools. By approaching the concept from an extended theory framework and a dialogically extended mind (DEM) perspective I offer a different understanding of 'silence' one which reveals its richness and complexity in a deserving non-reductionist way. I draw on the argument offered by Fusaroli, Gangopadhyay & Tylen (2013) concerning DEM, and combine it with Carter's (2006) views on silence, to propose a different understanding of silence; a tool of a dialogical engagement which enhances thought. I am aware that while many studies of cognition have assessed language comprehension, few have focused on how words, like tools, can be used to accomplish tasks via external means (Borghi & Cimatti, 2009). Silence seems to be absent from such studies that explore the social aspect of words as tools of cognition. Therefore, I try to show how words in their visibility (voice) and invisibility (silence) enhance thought and extend cognition.

On a personal level this study I undertake is important to me because I work at a woman's college with more than 24,000 female students enrolled. I take women's issues at heart and seize every opportunity to understand the young women learners I work with better. Some of these students are married and some have children, yet they are all fulltime students. Their lives are imbued with different responsibilities. This piece of research provides me a possibility to understand those lives differently and accordingly brings the human aspect into perspective at one level, and during tutor/student-student interaction online. On another deeper level, it accentuates the importance of the human element

in course design and for online settings. In this study I do not address pedagogical concerns, I am primarily interested in fueling a different narrative related to online silence and paving way for future studies concerned with online pedagogy and (text-based) interaction. My focus in the empirical part of the study is *my experience* as a tutor in the Kuwaiti higher education college. Using an autoethnographic methodological research approach, I analyse the dynamics between silence and voice of nine email texts I received from a Kuwaiti female student, and shed light over a concept that has been associated with powerlessness and passivity (Gal, 1989; Parpart, 2013). I narrate my experience and insert myself reflectively throughout the text (as I see suitable), autoethnography allows me to do so.

With that in mind, and within the Kuwaiti college context, using the email online texts of a Kuwaiti female student, I address the following question:

- How can silence be understood in the light of a dialogically extended mind (DEM)?

Namely, how can silence be conceived as a tool of cognition that enables individuals to form an intersubjective cognitive system?

To answer these two related questions, I posit these sub-questions:

- What is the relationship between voice and silence?
- What role does silence play in enhancing cognition?
- What implications does DEM have for the feminist views on silence?

Following this, I give an overall view on the construct of silence within the feminist literature. I then allude to extended mind theory and progress to a discussion on DEM perspective and theoretical framework. Subsequently, I elucidate my methodological research approach of autoethnography, contextualise my experience and attend to narrate my email story. I end the paper by tying the knots of my discussion and then conclusion.

2. Silence; the invisible other – an overall view

Feminists have drawn attention to the invisibility of women in literature and academic disciplines; women's experiences were either distorted or misinterpreted. The feminist quest was to correct the record and reveal women's experiences wherever they were absent (Lazreg, 1994; Smith, 1988). Women's experience is understood to be located within structures of power relations between men

and women; devalued and often silenced. To posit personal experience as valid is to give women an authoritative voice (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Hence, the concepts of experience and voice are central to feminist research and thought, although it is difficult to find an agreed definition of the terms (Lazreg, 2012).

Whether in research or pedagogy, the claim is the same; the validity of experience is fundamental (Weiler, 1991). Women as a result are empowered (Humm, 1991). The feminist stance is premised on the notion of voice, and the physicality of voice in sharing women's experiences (Mishra, 2013). It becomes obvious then how voice and silence are perceived as opposites. It has been said that "women who cannot speak out are seen as disempowered, unable to act and to effect change" (Parpart, 2013, p. 15). A 'speaking subject' is a fulfilled feminist objective (Solnit, 2017). In this sense, voice is used as a metaphor which implies a strategy that aims to empower (Kenway & Modra, 1992). Voice is aspired and celebrated while silence is demeaned and leads to women's invisibility. Accordingly, voice as it is conceptualised is an oppressive concept (MacMillan, 1995; McNeil, 1992; Orner, 1992). Locked in a binary construct, silence is the unwanted product and a sign of powerlessness.

This dichotomised view, built on an either/or logic, is ahistorical, decontextualised and abstract (Mohanty, 2003). Feminists' construction of voice and silence is trapped in an opposition, creating a dualism of voice, seen as *always* powerful, and silence, seen as *always* powerless (Orner, 1992). This binary structure is simplistic and confines the two concepts to a hierarchical relationship preventing other forms of understandings to emerge. Feminist critics argue against this binary system (Mishra, 2013; Mohanty, 1986). They assert situating individuals socially, culturally, and historically. People's local context and trans-local context matter in understanding their experiences (Curnow, 2016). And those who view silence with a singular meaning ignore the shifting relations of power and the profound contextual nature of interaction (Orner, 1992). Studies have shown that silence is used as a strategic and survival tool (Lazreg, 2012; Lewis, 1994; Parpart, 2013; Potter, 2015). Silence provides time to reflect, think and formulate questions in a classroom setting (Alerby & Alerby, 2003; Peterson, 2010). It is also used as a resistance tool and an act of a challenge in the different contexts (Carter, 2006; Mishra, 2013; Parpart, 2013; Trehan & Rigg, 2006).

It is simply erroneous to restrict silence to a reductionist meaning, which evades the complexity and the interrelatedness of silence and voice. In order to understand silence and release other forms of understandings, it must be freed from

this dualism. Attention must be drawn to analysing silence, and the different forms it may take (Ellsworth, 1992; Lather, 1987). Dismantling the binary structure means exploring silence in process and as it is experienced. It also means looking for ways to perceive silence as part of the contextual dynamic and not only a product of it.

My experience working as a woman tutor in the Kuwaiti women's college does not comply to the feminist construction of silence. In my thirty years of work, I have witnessed myriad incidents where I found female students use their silence and voice tactfully and persistently. I found some of my women students already powerful not in need to be empowered. *These compelling examples are erased when a dichotomised depiction is forced upon silence*, which makes the search for different meanings more pressing. This research stems out of my genuine concern working with young women in the Kuwaiti women's college. And the frustration with the *restricted* images rendered for silent women. The story I choose to share is unique; it is an incident I experienced with a female student of mine I call Amal. I am hoping that Amal's story and mine could help deepen our understanding of silence and enrich the feminist argument. But first I allude to the theoretical framework that will guide the meaning making of my email experience.

3. Beware, minds are everywhere; the *dialogically extended mind* (DEM) – a theoretical framework

Extension theory (ET) is not a unified theoretical framework on human-technology relations (Heersmink, 2012). But all variations share the basic idea that technical objects are projections or extensions of human organism "by way of replicating, amplifying, or supplementing bodily or mental faculties or capabilities" (Lawson, 2010, p. 2). While artefacts can be experienced as distinct objects, in a stronger version of ET humans and artefact merge and become a "new systemic wholes" (Heersmink, 2012, p. 122). This system is characterised by integrating technology/artefact in the body schema or the cognitive system allowing artefacts to become part of the human motor and perceptual system. The new whole is a coupled system; a two-way interaction system where both have a causal role in the cognitive process (Clark & Chalmers, 1998).

In the coupled systemic whole, the human-tool boundaries are diminished forming an extended enhanced human that confronts the world. External objects, therefore, have an active role and direct impact on the human through 'active externalism' (Clark & Chalmers, 1998). In extended cognition

of the coupled system, the external features are as important as the internal features of the brain; they have the power to enhance our internal cognitive processes (Borghi et al., 2013). Therefore, cognitive processes take place in relation to the experience of the body and impact the environment through a symbiotic external cognitive system (Sarosiek, 2016).

Words are also seen as external devices and cognitive tools; thus, they extend our cognitive abilities. Clark (1998) explains that although language and words extend our minds, language is a tool for structuring and controlling action. Words are “endowed with the power to augment and complement our computational abilities,” they then can be used as a tool of modification and instruments of action (Borghi et al., 2013, p. 4). For Borghi and Cimatti (2009) words are conceived as a set of social tools with each word acting as a specific tool of direct experience that are used in our daily life experiences. For them, an individual experience has two sides/sources; an individual one and a social one. The first one is located in the individual mind and the second one outside the mind; particularly in the words and language one uses to formulate internal verbal thought. Perceiving words as tools means that they are projections/extensions of inner cognition into the social world, i.e., a socially extended cognition (Fusaroli, Gangopadhyay & Tylen, 2013). This social component of words as external devices and cognitive tools is undervalued within approaches to extended cognition (Borghi et al., 2013).

Further, and according to Borghi et al. (2013), words can be used as tools of action; they accomplish goals. But words work as tools only when other people collaborate, i.e., they work effectively if they promote a positive dynamic interaction with others – a willingness to collaborate. This is a linguistic intersubjective activity, Borghi et al. explain, where “*individuals come to jointly apprehend and manipulate information to create informational and behavioural interpersonal synergies, which potentially outstretch the cognitive abilities of any of the individuals were they on their own*” (p. 32, my italics). Hence, through the intersubjective dynamics individuals become each other’s cognitive extensions giving rise to composite units that exceed the individual part. Fusaroli, Gangopadhyay & Tylen (2013) stress the importance of the cognitive enhancing potential of language which “facilitates informational-synergy-creating intersubjective coupling” that constitutes a dialogically extended mind (DEM) (p.6). Language, then, is a tool for interacting minds which enables dialogical engagement through its materiality.

But what about ‘invisible’ silence? The discussion above considers words as social tools; they are expressed through

our bodies written or spoken. They also function as tools when they promote a dynamic intersubjective interaction. Therefore, the absence of words (silence) could mean the erasure of their physicality and function. This seems to be possible when words are tied to collaboration, understood as the ‘willingness’ to (visibly) work (Fusaroli, Gangopadhyay & Tylen, 2013; Borghi et al., 2013), while (implicitly) non-collaboration (silence) is seen as ‘unwillingness’ to (visibly) collaborate and work, revealing what seems to be an implicit bias against silence based on a dichotomised view.

Still the argument above, particularly in relation to DEM, seems to be promising. But there remains a hurdle to overcome with regards to silence. Trapped in a dichotomised depiction silence is seen “always as passive” and “*negatively perceived as a lack*” (Acheson, 2008, p. 537 & p. 536). Silence as such is excluded as an intersubjective tool that dialogically extends the minds of others. Releasing silence from the dichotomised entrapment, I believe, is a first step in my search for a different construct of silence. The second step is to focus on processes and interactions that underlie dialogical engagements with interlocutors. And to examine the communicative intersubjective dynamic within which silence might play a dialogical role extending interlocutors’ cognition.

To accomplish that I first turn to Carter’s (2006) feminist views on archival silence which invalidates the oppositional construct. It also provides an entryway to build an argument for silence as a tool of DEM.

4. Making sense; a dialogue between silence and voice

Carter’s (2006) study on archival silence, and his investigation on how silence is used as a method to deny the archives their records, offers an appealing account to evade the dichotomous frame. Archives include texts of different kinds; written, visual, audiovisual, and electronic. These physical records produced by members of the society are stored in the archives. Archives are social tools that extend a collective/societal memory. But Archives are also ‘spaces of power’ where certain narratives and types of records are included while others are excluded. The powerful ‘social memory keepers’, define the records that enter the archives by the act of inclusion and exclusion, creating what Fivush (2010) distinguishes as ‘master/canonical’ narratives. Thus, archives are impaired, leading to affected/compromised collective memory. That is, the records tell a small portion of a much larger and complex story. But they also allude to an excluded portion at the same time. This means that a

collective memory of a group/society is represented jointly by words, texts, and voices and their counterparts; silences and omissions. Carter's (2006) argument is helpful here because it rests on the understanding that within remembering is forgetting and within forgetting is remembering. Hence, Archives produce memory and forgetting concurrently. Accordingly, speech/words and silence are produced concurrently: they are "dependent and defined through the other" (p. 223).

Carter's delineation as such challenges the reductive account and the either/or logic that silence and voice are based on. Instead, the two are conceived to imply, define and depend on each other for their presence. Within the archiving context Carter (2006) refers to the 'absent-presence' term. That is, what is present in the archives is defined by what is not. In a dialogue situation, then: what is said/written is defined by what is not said/written – words are characterised/identified by what is not. The focus is clearly shifting from a binary-based understanding to a complex intimate unity relationship between voice and silence. The two appear to be intertwined; each delineating the other. This depiction, for me, necessitates the awareness that *silence and voice share the same space and temporality* (Acheson, 2008). It also alludes to the complexity and richness of silence and voice that surpasses a simple dichotomous depiction.

Next, I attempt to join both arguments; DEM and the depiction of silence and voice as a unity in order to explore the possibility of perceiving silence as a dialogical cognitive tool. For that I dedicate the rest of this study. First, I give an overall view of my research approach, I then focus on the interactive dynamic of my email experience and narrate my story.

5. Autoethnography; a methodological research approach to experience

Autoethnography is most suitable for this study; it is a methodology that allows researchers to write solely about their own experience (Richards, 2016). Autoethnographic researchers selectively and retrospectively write about 'epiphanies' that connect them to the wider culture (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). They use their experience as a vantage to elucidate aspects of cultural experience for insiders and outsiders. In the name of objectivity and reliability researchers are denied access to their emotions, feelings, and personal involvement in a project that depletes those same elements. "This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others... and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act..." (p. 1).

Autoethnography also challenges binary structures, therefore allows me as a researcher to look for other possibilities of understanding. For Pathak (2010), autoethnography allows her to make sense of the world she lives in. She talks about the false binary that has been created by 'scientific imperialism'. Knowledge is either of the body or the mind, thus creating a dualism that prevents us from considering *the possible ways they meet*. In this binary, knowledge is portrayed as apolitical; the intellectual is superior, while the body is inferior. According to Michelson (1996), the emotional and the physical being is just as informative to our being. They offer moments of connectedness to the world we live in. "To know is to engage an experience fully with one's mind, body, and heart" (Pathak, 2010, p. 4). To explore experience and legitimize it is to create spaces for multiple representations that challenge the norm. Awareness is gained exploring life stories and real experiences (Witherell, 2010). It is therefore empowering to engage in a process of autoethnography.

Autoethnography allows me to inscribe my email experience in a powerful way that invests emotion, body, and mind; an invitation of a unity in its approach. It is most appropriate in my search for a different meaning of silence that defies the binary norm. To my email story, I turn next.

6. Contextualising self

The last few days, before the semester comes to a close, I find emotionally draining. During this time, students' grades are finalised and published. Within two days of posting the final grades students who might suspect a human error can ask the tutor for a revision. But it is (almost) a norm that students ask tutors to reconsider (and raise) their grades regardless. At times, students' relatives or friends of relatives would intervene to have a grade raised, and sometimes these included staff members and colleagues. Here, I present one recent experience with Amal, the female student whom I taught.

'Educational media workshop' is a compulsory final year module that all female students must pass in order to graduate. I have taught this module several times; it convenes once a week for three hours. Students are required to produce various pieces of instructional media (approximately five mini-projects) according to a sequential timetable. Students work in small groups, but each has to individually produce their own pieces of work. The themed project for this particular semester was named 'I am woman,' and revolved around students' lives, or a woman who had a bearing on their lives.

A detailed coursework description (including assessment procedures and criteria) was shared, as well as an itemised timetable for all pieces of work. During the first meeting of class, we discussed all matters related to the module; objectives, requirements, attendance, assessment, and communication methods with tutors. Beside face-to-face appointments, students had access to my email. They also formed a WhatsApp group with a student-leader of their choice, who facilitated communication with me. Each piece of work was discussed during class meetings, sharing examples of the past students' work. Students were also encouraged to be creative and ask for guidance and extensions if needed. I explained that each work a student submitted received a written feedback, and a deserving grade. Students could eventually calculate their final grades for the course. I took the opportunity to emphasise that students 'made their grades'. I ended with a word of advice not to pursue me or seek outsiders' intervention to have their final grades raised. But this discussion did not deter one particular student, Amal, when her grade was published. Her name here is pseudonym.

My focus in this study is an email incident I encountered with Amal. I chose this incident because it is distinctive. In my thirty years working at the women's college I have not encountered an incident as such; it is simply unique in its occurrence and its content. It is also genuine because Amal was unaware that she was interacting with an absent tutor throughout the email episode. I was literally unavailable to read and respond to Amal's emails; my silence was unintentional during the entire episode. I read the entire email series three days after Amal ceased corresponding; this was two days prior to the end of the term. For me it is a perfect example of a dialogue between silence and voice. Taking into account that it is an online textual context, I am hoping that this exploration will enrich our understanding of 'silence'.

To grasp the events of the email episode in its entirety, I use two main sources; Amal's emails dispatched to me, and module records, including attendance, grades, and evaluation. I also express my feelings of this incident, which only occurred few months ago. I read the printed e-mail 'script' several times in its original Arabic text. I then translated the dialogue into English. I was true to the original script and ensured that the English translation portrayed the original meaning of the email script. Below, I share the detailed account of the email encounter to engage the readers with my story, findings and analysis. In doing so I allow the readers to be co-analysts in this investigation (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007).

7. The story: *caught between body and mind*

During the last few days of the previous term, I was particularly consumed by the amount of work that I had to complete within the college boundaries, especially with regard to students' assessments and final grades in the various other modules I taught. Checking my email messages was not a priority. I felt comfortable that my students' grades were posted on time and queries were answered within the time limit approved by college regulations, and all final grades were officially published. It was reassuring to also know that students were able to keep track of their grades throughout the progression of the module. Further, the assigned group leader was continuously in touch to relay any queries or concerns, the students might have had. Eventually, after a week of absence, I was able to attend to my email messages. I did not expect to see nine emails from Amal. Of course, she was unaware that I was virtually absent throughout the entire nine-email episode. I started reading the emails one after the other, bewildered, annoyed, but mostly astounded. I felt I was inundated and was unable to fathom the extent of the information confined in the textual space.

Amal sent her first email which simply read: "Hello Professor."

I was silent/absent.

The following day, she wrote: "I am a student in the Tuesday workshop, and I got a B- as my final grade. This grade has really lowered my grade point average (GPA). I was hoping to graduate this year, but my GPA is too low. Can you please, please raise my grade? I will not be able to graduate with my current GPA and I have already received multiple warnings to raise it."

I was silent/absent.

Later that day, Amal sent another email explaining: "Professor, I want to graduate this year. It is not fair to have to repeat your module in order to raise my GPA, please help me even if you raise me by one grade."

And I was silent/absent.

The next morning, she sent a pleading email: "Help me! I have got multiple academic warnings; I will not be able to graduate unless you raise my grade."

I was silent/absent.

Twenty minutes later, she wrote: “Change my grade! It is too low.”

And I was silent/absent.

Two minutes later Amal wrote: “I have no absences; I have made an effort to attend all classes even though I am pregnant and exhausted all the time. Please, I beg you, raise my grade!”

And I was silent/absent.

Approximately four hours later, she wrote: “Professor, I am physically and emotionally drained. I attend college every day, despite my morning sickness. Please understand what I am going through. I have been trying hard to raise my GPA, but because of the grade you gave me it has dropped.”

And I was silent/absent.

A minute later, she wrote: “Please, I beg you, raise my grade!” (followed by six ‘loudly crying face emojis,’ a graphical image representing facial expression).

And I was silent/absent.

The following day, Amal sent her last email saying: “Professor, the last day to officially register students’ grades is on the 30th, so I am begging you; change my grade!”

And I was silent/absent.

Amal was silent after this last email

And I remained silent/absent.

Feeling heavy-hearted that it might have been an error on my part, I immediately reviewed Amal’s attendance-record. I learned that she was not accurate to emphasise her full and punctual attendance. I went on to recheck her coursework marks and final grade and concluded that there were no calculation errors. I then decided not to respond to her emails; I was angry and overwhelmed and chose to remain silent. Reading through Amal’s lines (now), and hearing her desperate yet powerful words, I am left to wonder what would have happened had silence not been the final piece of the dialogue?

I have no doubt that my (unintentional) silence urged Amal’s nine textual emails, it played a pivotal role; it fueled the dynamic engagement the way it did. Amal did not ques-

tion my invisible presence; she accepted my silence, understood it and replied accordingly. Between her words and my silence, a dynamic dialogical interaction was revealed. Amal had an obvious goal; to raise her final subject grade, and her task was to convince me to do so. Her first email consisted of a greeting only. Perhaps, Amal hesitated to ask, or wanted to seize my attention, or perhaps it was a strategy to build her confidence; she initiated the dialogical encounter without a request, and that was received with silence.

In her following email, the next day, Amal sent a seemingly straightforward text establishing the setting (by introducing herself), providing a strong motive (low GPA and graduation) for her request (raising her grade), and further accentuating her motive (stating penalty/warnings). Amal received silence. But she had a lot to lose (according to her) and limited time to have her request fulfilled. Hours later and in response to my silence, she wrote a precise text clearly stating her motive, her moral stand (not fair to repeat subject), and her compromised/negotiated request (one grade up). That was also received with silence.

In response to my silence Amal asked for help the following day, explaining her motive/intention (to remove college penalty), Amal distinctly ties her eligibility to graduate (motive) with my action of raising her grade (her request). But her request was still farfetched, and was met with my silent reply. However, Amal did not give up, twenty minutes later, her plea became a direct authoritative order (change my grade!) and for a different reason (her low subject grade). Swiftly, two minutes later, she sent another email extending her thoughts to new areas (full attendance, effort to attend – pregnancy and exhaustion). My previous silences seemed to have facilitated her extension into other areas of her life as a pregnant female student. Amal changed her strategy from an authoritative demand to an urgent plea (please I beg). Yet, all of Amal’s attempts to justify and negotiate her case were all silently received. Hours later, she extended her thoughts to real experience; to which another woman (I) could relate to (the emotional and physical aspect of pregnancy, morning sickness). Amal insisted on being the victim (trying hard to raise her grade despite her situation) while blaming me, the authoritarian tutor, for her low GPA (because of the grade you gave). Minutes later, she reverted to sending a pleading request to raise her grade, while emotionally extending herself with six loudly crying emojis depicting her emotional state. But yet again, her request was met with silence.

In her final text, a day later, Amal sent some hopeful information (last day to register grades), urging me strongly (I am begging you) to accomplish her goal (raise the grade). But my silence/absence remained. Amal understood my last

silence and was silent thereon.

8. Discussion

It is clear that this email incident could be approached from different perspectives, and therefore different issues could arise as a result. Drawing on the feminist literature and specifically Carter's (2006) research on archives and the silence within, I have argued that to understand the rich and dynamic interplay of silence and voice a reductionist dichotomous view must be abandoned. Silence appears differently within the different contexts it is being exercised; it is particular even peculiar (Parpart, 2013). I have also argued that silence and voice are defined through and are dependent on each other. Building further, and with regard to words as dialogical cognitive tools, and DEM, on one hand, and the depiction of silence and voice, on the other hand, we could articulate an understanding of the relational character of silence and voice dynamics that could capture the richness of the email incident above. And further enhance the feminist view on silence.

A dialogically extended mind, discussed earlier, refers to the integration of individuals' minds into one system in which participants become each other's cognitive extensions. This is accomplished "through the *intersubjective interaction* and *coordination* of the material symbols" – words (Fusaroli, Gangopadhyay & Tylen, 2013, p. 6). In my email incident, it is evident that Amal was engaged and part of a dialogical exchange with silence (a silent/absent tutor) throughout. Yet, Amal constructed a dynamic interaction with silence in each step of the dialogue. And as the incident progressed, Amal seemed to interpret what my silence meant to her and responded accordingly; coordinating her perception, sharing her experience, negotiating her position, and further building her argument. In order to do that Amal had to 'live' in my mind to interpret my silence and engage accordingly and skillfully (Pagis, 2010). In other words, Amal was part of an intersubjective engagement that lead her to experience a composite cognitive unit (Fusaroli, Gangopadhyay & Tylen, 2013). Between my silence and her voice *jointly*, Amal seemed to be able to apprehend and manipulate what silence meant to her creating "informational and behavioural interpersonal synergy" (p. 2). She saw my silence as a collaborative act that allowed building her argument and interacting the way she did. Furthermore, my silence required her collaboration, which is apparent in the entire email episode. My silences were crucial and preceded Amal's leap into building the dialogue, presenting her demands, negotiating the solution the way she did (Wegerif, 2010).

Perhaps, the most telling part was her interaction on the second day. Within the course of four hours Amal sent five emails, three of them were minutes apart, as if she was in a race with silence; she seemed to have speculated what silence was going to say/(mean) and presented her answers consecutively. In fact, her interactive behaviour could be read as an urge to force talk out of my silence. She finally used her own silence to end the dialogical encounter. But in all, she seemed to be engaged in a dialogical interchange with silence that further extended her cognitive abilities and mind. Most importantly, silence for Amal seemed to be real; it existed and was felt and materialised. She in effect read (invisible) silence as if reading (visible) words and reacted appropriately, thus turning silence into a form of communication (Pagis, 2010). And, in a peculiar way, *silence became (physical/materialistic) 'content'* she analysed, understood and reacted to. Hence silence seemed to be an imperative part of the dialogue that required Amal's input. Silence is therefore dialogic and requires collaboration (Acheson, 2008). Accordingly, silence is an intersubjective dialogical tool that plays an important role in extending the minds of others. In other words, silence and voice *jointly* play a role in dialogically extending the minds of interlocutors.

9. Conclusion

My objective for this study was to investigate another understanding of silence that breaks free from the binary structure. Joining the feminist argument with DEM approach to cognition, I asked this question: how can silence be conceived as a tool of cognition that enables individuals to form an intersubjective cognitive system? I adopted an autoethnographic research approach and analysed my experience of an email incident I encountered with a female student I taught at a Kuwaiti woman's college.

In order for other powerful meanings to emerge, a simple binary approach to silence must be abandoned. Binaries erase complexity and reflect distorted images of silence and silent women. I have argued for a depiction that rests on a unity, perhaps a fusion between silence and voice. Fusion means there are no defined boundaries between silence and voice. This unity and fusion lead to a new construct of words that allows a fluid shifting relationship between silence and voice - they are enmeshed (see Dhamoon's (2011) argument of intersectionality). The emphasis on the social activity of words offers a compelling insight; to conceive the materiality of words as enablers of the dialogical engagement. There is also a possibility that silence is conceived materialistically in the dialogical encounter. This physicality seems to be possible if we conceive silence and voice to exist in each

other rather than oppose one another. To understand one means the other must be accounted for. Hence, silence and voice are not fixed and cannot be exactly depicted on their own. Consequently, both voice and silence imply words (Fivush, 2006).

Dialogic silence as such enriches the feminist views; silence is no longer equivalent to powerlessness. And accordingly, the prevailing silent women images are challenged. If anything, silence is active, powerful and dialogic; it extends interlocutor's mind. This depiction is possible when research and analysis focus on the interactive process of interaction. Rather than fixing on products (silence/voice) the shift to process reveals how meanings are produced, experiences and information are shared, and decisions are made in the dialogical encounter.

Most importantly, this study furthered my understanding of silence; a dialogical tool that extends the mind. I am more aware of the engrained preconceived descriptions that afflict and affect how we see silent women/others. Although there are some limitations for this study such as: one interacting person, one main source of data and limited amount of data to analyse; it presents some powerful implications. Such implications concern pedagogy in general and educational technology design in particular. It allows serious discussions concerning the concept of collaboration, online interaction, and online textual exchanges as the focus of future research within the field of educational technology and design.

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