Waaait for It

You’re sitting in class and after the professor asks a question, there’s dead silence. No one raises a hand; no one offers even a partial answer. The silence feels awkward and hugely uncomfortable.

But does it have to feel that way? According to Professor Bob Kegan, silence can actually be an important tool intentionally used by instructors. By waiting a little bit before calling on a student to answer a question, even if several hands shoot up, teachers are giving all students more time to reflect on what is being asked, and students can better articulate how they want to answer. Wait time, as Kegan calls it, also makes it less stressful for quieter students.

“Waiting a few more seconds actually can be quite productive,” Kegan says in a video about wait time on the website for Instructional Moves, an Ed School project designed to give useful teaching tools to educators. Kegan says that even if the silence feels awkward and the teacher thinks no one will step up and talk, eventually someone will, and “as soon as someone starts, it’s like opening the floodgate. You’ll have more people wanting to volunteer than you have space for.”

Here are a few additional tips from Kegan and other professors at the Ed School on how to start using this wait time practice in class:

▶ Be patient. Before calling on a student, count several seconds in your head.
▶ Make wait time the norm in your classes, and tell students why you do it. Consistency and transparency will help avoid confusion. (“Why isn’t anyone talking?”) It will also underscore the value of “think time.”
▶ Simply say less. Resist the temptation to fill dead air with a rephrased version of your question or to answer an unanswered question yourself. LH

Beware Assessments

For years, educational systems around the world were smitten with Finland. Year after year, big international test score rankings showed tiny Finland leading the pack in content areas like math and science, and everyone wanted to know how to recreate “the Finnish miracle.”

But as Professor Judith Singer points out in her new paper, “Testing International Education Assessments,” published in the April issue of *Science*, this obsession with rankings “not only misleads, it diverts attention from more constructive uses” of the data.

Instead, countries should use information from assessments to learn more about themselves, Singer writes along with Henry Braun, a professor at Boston College. Data pulled from tests like PISA and TIMSS can also be used to help spark political will as governments pay attention to the findings and the public, in turn, demands action.

With this in mind, here are several factors not often considered when reading only the headlines of these international test score stories, Singer points out:

▶ Not all 15-year-olds (target age) are counted in a given country or region. In 2012, for example, Shanghai excluded 27 percent of its 15-year-olds. In Mexico and Turkey, as many as 40 percent of students that age dropped out.
▶ Only about 50 to 75 countries or regions routinely administer these international large-scale assessments — a statistically small number that can make it difficult to truly identify patterns.
▶ Private tutoring is popular in many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In South Korea, for example, half of the participants who took the 2012 PISA test reported receiving private tutoring, often focused on — guess what? — doing well on tests.
▶ Test scores only give us an average for an entire country. Variations within a country — how teachers are trained or socioeconomic factors — are not taken into account. Countries with decentralized education systems, like the United States, Canada, and Germany, are ranked alongside countries with centralized, national school systems, such as France. LH

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