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The Silent Lesson

JOHN HILTON III

John Hilton III (johnhiltoniii@byu.edu) is an assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU.

One day during my second semester as a part-time seminary teacher, a student named Mindy came into class and asked, “Brother Hilton, are we going to do a silent lesson this year?” When I told her that I had never heard of a silent lesson, she said, “Brother Kirkham just taught a silent lesson, and I heard it was really awesome. You should ask him how to do it.”

Wanting to be a good seminary teacher, I approached Brother Kirkham and asked him to teach me about silent lessons. He obliged, and I began regularly using them in a variety of gospel settings, including seminary lessons, Young Men and Young Women classes, institute courses, BYU religion classes, Especially for Youth sessions, and Education Week classes. Silent lessons provide a unique way to help students have an in-class experience that helps them connect directly with the scriptures and the Spirit.

While some teachers already use silent lessons, many may not be familiar with this approach. In this article, I will define silent lessons, explain how they can fit into the context of Latter-day Saint gospel classrooms, provide an example of a silent lesson, and suggest how to navigate around potential pitfalls associated with this pedagogical approach. Before discussing silent

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lessons in a Latter-day Saint context, it might be helpful to recognize that this approach has been used in other contexts for some time.

Background

A silent lesson is just what its name implies—a lesson in which there is no talking. In some versions of silent lessons, neither teachers nor students speak. In other versions, only the students do not speak; and in still others, only teachers do not speak, but students can. In many instances within a Latter-day Saint context, the teacher prepares thought-provoking questions along with images and passages of scriptures so that students can silently ponder these during the class period.

Educators generally agree that variety is an important part of good pedagogy.¹ An occasional silent lesson can provide some of that variety. Several writers have advocated this approach, for at least a century. An article published in 1883 advocated an approach in art instruction in which the learners were completely silent and learned only from observation. The article states, “The watchers have probably learned more in the course of that silent lesson than during three times the amount of verbal instruction.”² In 1912, a journal entitled *Primary Education* encouraged educators to, “for a change, have a silent ‘lesson.’”³ In 1915, the *Ohio Educational Monthly* similarly stated, “For variety . . . have an occasional silent lesson.”⁴ A book titled *First Spelling Book*, published in 1914, also encouraged teachers to employ silent lessons.⁵

More recently, an educator named Eugene P. Smith discussed using a silent lesson when teaching math to students in China.⁶ This lesson, which focused on mathematical functions, was based on students working on the board and receiving silent feedback from their instructor on their performance. Dave Hewitt also wrote about using silent lessons when teaching math. Hewitt works in teacher education and taught his students to utilize silent lessons when teaching their own students. He said that this approach would help student teachers “work with pupils in a way which was different to the way in which they had normally worked with pupils up to that point in time. In this way [he] hoped [the student teachers] would come to know, through their own experience of working with pupils, different ways of working and extend the possibilities open to them in the future.”⁷

Teacher Gabi Bonner spoke of her reasoning behind using a silent lesson with students who were learning English: “I was . . . hoping the ‘novelty value’ of a completely silent lesson might also capture and sustain their attention and

interest.”⁸ Silent lessons have been used in a variety of other fields, including fencing.⁹ Educators note that a key benefit of silent lessons is that it provides a unique setting outside the normal routine of class that can become a catalyst for significant learning.

The Silent Lesson in a Latter-day Saint Context

Several examples of silent lessons are available in online forums and blogs regarding Latter-day Saint teaching. For example, Eric Carter wrote about a silent lesson he taught in seminary about Nephi’s psalm.¹⁰ Kate Porter shared a silent lesson designed for Young Women classes that focused on the Atonement.¹¹ Another Church member created a silent lesson to be used at Christmas as a special Mutual activity.¹² One woman created a silent lesson to be used at Young Women’s Camp.¹³ A group of seminary teachers worked together and created a silent lesson that utilized different rooms in the building to more effectively teach a large group of students.¹⁴

The genre of silent lesson that my student requested, and the type I have found to be particularly powerful, is a lesson in which nobody talks—at least not until the very end of the lesson. It combines scripture passages, reflective questions, video clips, and music into a seamless blend of silent searching and pondering. This approach can help create an environment where the Spirit can do the teaching. A seminary student (not mine) wrote about a silent lesson that she had been taught in seminary: “Truly one of the most spiritual experiences of my life happened today in seminary!! Today we had a silent lesson. . . . I actually like silent lessons! They just invite the Spirit so much!”¹⁵

Silent lessons can put students in a position where they are responsible to capture their own valuable insights. This type of instruction is important because, as Elder David A. Bednar explained, “the most important learnings in life are caught—not taught.”¹⁶ Similarly, in a 2011 question-and-answer session with employees of Seminaries and Institutes, Elder Bednar counseled teachers to “get out of the way.” He later said, “I would just simply pose this question: How do I invite these young people to learn for themselves?”¹⁷ I believe that silent lessons can at times do just that.

After using a silent lesson, teachers can point out to students that they just participated in the process of silently studying the scriptures, asking and answering questions, and actively looking for meaningful phrases. These are all activities students can do during their personal scripture study at home. When students understand that they can have powerful experiences in their

personal study, they can be more motivated to seriously search the scriptures on their own.

Sample Silent Lessons

There are many scripture blocks that can be appropriately taught using a silent lesson. In particular, lessons that focus on a powerful event, such as the Crucifixion, Christ's visit to America, or the Martyrdom lend themselves to this approach.¹⁸ In order to help readers visualize what such a silent lesson might look like in practice, I have placed one online. In the next section as I explain this silent lesson, I will refer to PowerPoint slides that are available for download as part of a .zip file at <http://www.johnhiltoniii.com/silent-lesson>. This .zip file contains the PowerPoint presentation and its associated media files (the media files are already embedded into the PowerPoint).¹⁹ It is only one example of what a silent lesson could look like; I certainly do not intend to insinuate that it is the best example of a silent lesson, but provide it in hopes that it will spark further exploration about how silent lessons can be developed and utilized. The PowerPoint is intentionally plain so as to not distract from its message. My purpose in posting the file is to show how video and music clips can be integrated with a PowerPoint to create a learning experience for students. By way of context, this particular lesson was taught in the context of Religion 121, a Book of Mormon course that covers 1 Nephi–Alma 29.

A Silent Lesson for Mosiah 14–16

As students walked into the room, I had a slide posted on the screen that said, "Welcome to a very special day." I waited an extra thirty seconds after the bell rang before starting class to give latecomers an extra opportunity to be seated before the lesson began. Rather than asking the class to quiet down so that class could begin, I turned off all of the lights and advanced the PowerPoint one slide forward (in most of the settings where I have taught silent lessons, having the lights turned off has added to the ambience. Typically, there is enough light from the projector to allow students to read the passages we are studying. In some cases, students have used light from their cell phones to read scripture passages).

Students immediately stopped talking and started reading what was on the screen: "Today's class will be a Silent Lesson. We'll focus less on using our ears/mouth and more on using our eyes. Please open your scriptures to

Mosiah 14. All you need today is scriptures and something to write with. Feel free to adjust your seats so you can see the screen better."

At this point, students could tell that the class period they were about to experience would be different. I believe that this can heighten readiness to learn and, when done appropriately, create an environment in which students are willing to expend more effort in asking the Holy Ghost to be with them. Next I directly asked them to invite the Spirit by putting the following message on the screen: "Let's begin with an opening prayer. Please offer a silent prayer on your own and invite the Holy Ghost to be with you and our class as a whole."

With these preliminary messages behind us, we could turn our focus to the scriptures. The remainder of the lesson used slides that invited students to read passages, showed video clips that related to those passages, and asked students to write down responses to reflective questions that related to the verses and media that students were experiencing.

I have found it effective to have students read something from the scriptures and then see that same scene visually portrayed. Principles of good pedagogy, such as giving students something to look for and asking questions that invite pondering, also play a vital role in silent lessons. For example, at one point I invited students to carefully read Mosiah 14:7 and 15:5–6 and asked them to find phrases that stood out as they read. I also asked them a question about a specific phrase and how they could apply it to their lives. Next, students saw a video clip that portrayed the events of these verses. In this way, students were able to actively participate by reading about the Savior's Atonement, seeing a depiction of this scene, and hopefully inviting the Holy Ghost to witness of the truth and power of this event as they wrote about their feelings (see slide below).

- Carefully read Mosiah 14:7 and Mosiah 15:5–6
- What phrases stand out to you?
- What do you think is significant about the phrase "opened not his mouth"? Could you stay quiet if others were mocking you? Write down your responses.

Again, my hope as I do silent lessons is that students will ponder the questions, write down responses, and reflect on their feelings as they read the verses. At the end of many silent lessons (including this one), there is an opportunity for the teacher and students to share their testimonies about what they have been studying. Many teachers have found that this time for sharing is the most powerful part of the class period. Thus teachers should pace their silent lessons in such a way that there is ample time at the end of class for students to share. Sometimes, inviting students to share a phrase from the scriptures that was particularly meaningful to them can be an effective way of creating a nonthreatening environment for sharing testimonies. It may also be helpful to privately invite one or two students before class begins to share their testimonies at the appropriate point in the lesson in order to prime the sharing pump.

Potential Problems

As with many teaching methods, there are a number of important issues to consider when contemplating the use of silent lessons. Perhaps one of my most important concerns relates to the possibility of manipulating students' feelings by creating an emotional, rather than a spiritual, environment. Clearly, this is something that teachers must guard against. When approached in a spirit of humility, the silence, scriptures, and media can work together to create a uniquely powerful environment where the Spirit can teach; however, teachers should take care to not sensationalize the approach.²⁰ My second caution to teachers is to avoid overusing this type of lesson. Personally, I do not present them more than once per semester.²¹

Some may be concerned about the effort involved in creating silent lessons. To find and arrange the media clips necessary to produce this type of silent lesson can be very time consuming. However, with the increasing number of video clips available from the Church (e.g., the Bible videos, Mormon Messages, Mormon Messages for Youth, and so on), finding media to integrate is not as difficult as it once was. To ameliorate the time concerns, teachers in some instances can share the silent lessons they create with others. While this collaboration needs to be done within the bounds of propriety,²² I have greatly benefited from colleagues who have shared their silent lessons with me. I in turn have made modifications to those lessons and then given them to others. One institute teacher received a silent lesson from another

teacher, but was able to make modifications as he was inspired to do so. He wrote:

I tried [the silent lesson] on my night class, which lasts 90 minutes, and my students really liked it. . . . In fact, it turned out to be one of the most powerful lessons we have had this year. During the lesson in a few places I wanted to share a thought or ask a different question, so instead of saying anything out loud I would click on the PowerPoint, add a page and then type something right on the screen. . . . The kids would read along as I typed and then respond. The few times I did this really added to the Spirit. At the end I had a slide that said something like . . . "In a few minutes I will break the silence and ask you to share your feelings and testimony about what the Spirit has taught you tonight. . . . Please be ready to share if you would like." That turned out to be a really awesome little testimony meeting about the Savior and Easter. Several of the students also made comments on the process of learning they had experienced and said that they realized that they could apply the same kinds of questions and journal writing into their own personal scripture study.²³

In this case, the teacher was able to modify what had originally been created to be even more effective in his setting. His students experienced a powerful way of learning and articulated ways in which they could further apply this in their lives.

Conclusion

Some of the most powerful teaching moments in my career have come during silent lessons. I believe this is because of the unique way in which a silent lesson can invite the Spirit. One seminary student (not mine) wrote of her experience with a silent lesson: "It was probably one of the most powerful lessons I've ever had. *We relied on the Spirit to be our teacher*, and for the first time, I realized that the Atonement didn't account just for our sins but also for our trials and sufferings. I realized that the Savior understood me and how I feel."²⁴ Such statements are written not only by seminary students. After I taught a silent lesson to a classroom full of returned missionaries, one wrote, saying, "It was a beautiful experience, and I needed it very much."²⁵ Another student wrote, "What I like about silent lessons is that the Spirit teaches me directly. And what I get out of the class might be completely different from what somebody else gets."²⁶

A teacher used a silent lesson at a session of Especially for Youth. Speaking of this experience, he wrote that it was "by far the best teaching experience of my life. I had 300 students engaged in learning on their own. After the lesson on Thursday evening and all day Friday all the students came up and said how much they loved the lesson. It set me up for the [lesson on Friday]

as I reminded my students that their favorite lesson was one that I did not participate in. . . . I reminded them they did not need EFY . . . because silent lessons can be self-taught as they take control of their role in learning.”²⁷

Over the years, I have lost track of my old student Mindy; however, I am still grateful to her for suggesting that I try to teach a silent lesson. Many of my favorite teaching experiences have come on days when I have said next to nothing. Silent lessons can provide variety to invite student attention and create a powerful environment in which students turn heavenward and learn directly from the Spirit. **RE**

Notes

1. Educator Robert Leamson writes, “The most effective teaching will be done by teachers who vary their approach.” *Thinking about Teaching and Learning* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 1999), 101. A Church manual advises, “When you use a variety of learning activities, learners tend to understand gospel principles better and retain more.” *Teaching, No Greater Call: A Resource Guide for Gospel Teaching* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), 89.
2. *The Magazine of Art*, vol. 6 (1883); quoted at “Full Record NIRP,” VADS; <http://www.vads.ac.uk/flarge.php?uid=189820&sos=0> (accessed June 5, 2013).
3. “A Talk on Reading II,” in *Primary Education* 20, no. 8 (October 1912): 457. In context, the suggestion was for primary school teachers to have students walk past the blackboard, silently read a word and act out that word, and then go on to the next word.
4. Mabel McDougall, “The Beginning of Things,” *Ohio Educational Monthly* 64, no. 1 (January 1915): 20.
5. Margaret A. Purcell. *First Spelling Book* (New York: World Book, 1914).
6. Eugene P. Smith, “An American Teaches in Shanghai Middle School #2,” *The Arithmetic Teacher* 27, no. 5 (January 1980): 48–49.
7. Dave Hewitt, “Feedback: Expanding a Repertoire and Making Choices,” in *Learning through Teaching Mathematics*, ed. Roza Leikin and Rins Zazkis (New York: Springer, 2010), 265.
8. Gabi Bonner, “Silence is Golden: Going to Extremes to Reduce TTT,” *IH Journal*, no. 23 (Autumn 2007): 28. Bonner based her work on C. Gattegno, *Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: The Silent Way* (New York: Educational Solutions, 1972).
9. Walter Green wrote, “It is possible to deliver a complete fencing lesson silently, without oral cues, instruction, or discussion (beyond, perhaps, a brief statement of the lesson objectives). This removes oral cues from the lesson, forcing the student to focus on visual and tactile information. The silent lesson develops the Fencer’s problem-solving and decision-making capabilities without verbal cues. By removing oral instruction from the lesson, the Master forces the fencer to adapt to the conditions presented by the Master and to read cues that signal opportunities for successful actions, much as the fencer would have to in a bout.” Walter Green, “The Fencing Lesson—The Silent Lesson,” *Ezine Articles*; <http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Fencing-Lesson---The-Silent-Lesson&cid=4467985> (accessed June 12, 2010).
10. Eric Carter, “A Silent Lesson,” *Dig and Discover* (blog), October 6, 2009; <http://otnotboring.blogspot.com/2009/10/silent-lesson.html>.

11. Kate Porter, “Silent Easter and Atonement Lesson,” Sugardoodle (blog), April 5, 2012; http://www.sugardoodle.net/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8569.
12. “Silent Lesson—Version 2: Christ Is Born!” *Young Women Connection*; <http://www.ywconnection.com/Holiday/pageHsilentlessonv2.html>.
13. Personal communication, June 10, 2013.
14. These seminary teachers wanted to create a special experience at Easter. Students from different seminary classes met together in a large room, and each student was given a book with pictures, quotes, questions, and space to write down thoughts. Each room in the building had a different theme (including the Garden Tomb, the Last Supper, Gethsemane, special witnesses of Christ, and the temple). Students were allowed to visit each room according to their own time frame, with the expectation that they would see all of the rooms in the allotted time. Each room had been specially decorated, and some had video clips, talks from prophets, and other resources that students could experience. At the conclusion, all of the classes met back together and students shared their testimonies of the Savior.
15. Aubbley Shea, “Silence Is the Best Teacher!” *A Dancer’s World* (blog), March 29, 2011; <http://aubbleyshea.blogspot.com/2011/03/silence-is-best-teacher.html>.
16. David A. Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith,” address to CES Religious Educators, February 3, 2006, West Jordan, UT.
17. David A. Bednar, Question and Answer Session with Seminaries and Institutes, Worldwide Training Broadcast, August 2, 2011.
18. Thus Isaiah 53, Luke 22–24, Mosiah 14–16, 3 Nephi 11, and Doctrine and Covenants 135 are particularly good scripture blocks for a silent lesson.
19. These audiovisual files are all readily accessible, either at lds.org, youth.lds.org, or the Internet in general. All I have done is combine them into this teaching resource. See the copyright file in the .zip file for further information.
20. For example, silent lessons can be made sensational by employing inappropriate questions or by showing too much video and not having enough scripture references for students to read.
21. Another potential concern relates to intellectual property rights. It is important to stay within the bounds of the law.
22. In the case of Seminaries and Institutes, there are some policies that limit sharing outside of one’s geographical area. Those employed by Seminaries and Institutes may want to consult with their area director for additional information.
23. Personal communication with institute teacher, April 22, 2012.
24. Lauren Homer, quoted in Melissa Merrill, “Seminary Program Anchors Students in the Gospel,” *Church News and Events*, September 28, 2011; <https://www.lds.org/church/news/seminary-program-anchors-students-in-the-gospel?lang=eng> (accessed August 1, 2013); emphasis added.
25. Personal communication with a student, October 18, 2012.
26. Personal communication with a student, n.d.
27. Personal communication with an EFY session director, October 22, 2012.