As a college student, I was rarely the first to raise my hand or respond to a question posed during class. I was shy by nature and always felt like I had little to offer. There were times, however, that I would interject simply to break the long silence after the instructor asked a question. In those cases, the silence was either too uncomfortable to bear or I figured that my response would be no worse than anyone else's. There was also the threat of a pop quiz or some other academic challenge looming for the unresponsive class, which included students who obviously either did not know the content or had not read the assignment. I believe this is an experience all college students have faced at one time or another.

When I became a teacher, I was asking questions for several reasons; to gauge students' understanding of course concepts, to determine if they had completed reading assignments, and mainly to start an engaging discussion. But once again, those silences followed many of the questions I posed. It was a concern for me because I felt I had failed as an educator. Either my expectations were too high or my assignments were not designed well enough to cover course concepts and goals.

Instructor asks a question to the class, the class either looks down or passes quick glances around the room to see if anyone looks like they are about to answer, and if no one is giving any indication of preparing a response the atmosphere becomes tense. Eventually, either some brave soul will wade into the discussion in the hopes of breaking the awkward silence, or the instructor will answer the question and continue on.

Powerful force. By its nature it builds anticipation, and that can be where the stress comes in from the student's perspective. Silence used for contemplation has a place in discussions, but as educators we need to establish a classroom climate that takes the tension out of silence. So how do we do that? Here are...
some approaches to consider:

One possible technique is to ask a question with a qualifying parameter such as "Take a moment and consider..." or "Think about (how, what, why) for a moment." This lets the students know that an immediate answer is not required, while also making the point that you expect a moment of quiet contemplation.

Another approach is to project the question on an overhead or projector in class at the beginning and throughout the class period. This gives the students a chance to preview the question and begin thinking about a response. Their reflection can take place in a more holistic sense, and they can consider their answers within the context of the additional related course material that's being presented. This allows students the time many of them need to synthesize new information and apply it to their response.

And who is to say that such moments cannot take place, at least partially, outside of class time? Informing students of summary questions either at the prior class meeting or via email a few days before class might help prompt them to consider their responses, especially if you are explicit in setting the expectation that they need to come prepared to discuss these specific topics. Some students will come ready to discuss while others can continue to contemplate their response during a more active discussion. The silence is displaced, while the benefits still remain.

In these examples, students are encouraged to consider an answer rather than regurgitate information, so responses to factual or definition-based questions may not be a good fit for such an approach. The goal is to create a less tense atmosphere with better reflection and to use the silence, when present, in a positive way.

Part of our mission as educators is to create thoughtful individuals, and creating and encouraging a moment of silent reflection can have a positive effect on that mission. So enjoy the silence and the benefits it can bring.  

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