

INTROVERT? EXTROVERT?

Tips for a Balanced Classroom

by Shawn Thompson

Over the years I've noticed that my introverted students have a hard time adjusting to some aspects of learning because of their introversion, which could be expected to further complicate the situation by undermining their self-esteem.

This is not a problem coming from them alone. Their teachers and classmates can misunderstand introversion and increase the pressure that the introverted students feel.

I ought to know, because I am an introverted teacher who has struggled for years without understanding introversion myself. Introverts don't always understand introversion. I know that I didn't.

Introversion is an innate temperament beginning at birth that reveals itself in a collection of preferences in behaviour, according to a source I rely heavily on, the psychologist Marti Olsen Laney, the introverted author of the 2002 book *The Introvert Advantage: How to Thrive in an Extrovert World*.

People span the spectrum of introversion and extroversion from a high preference for one or the other, to varying degrees of a balance somewhere in the middle. The main differences that identify introverts and extroverts are the source of their personal energy, their sense of boundaries and their comfort zone.

The simplest way to explain the difference is that introverts are energized by quiet, privacy and being alone or in small groups, and are drained by noise, distraction and crowds. They are oriented toward an inner life. Extroverts are the opposite. They are energized by crowds and stimulation, and drained by being alone. They are oriented toward an outer life.

The differences begin in biology. The main neurotransmitter used by introverts is acetylcholine, which also stores information during sleep, and there are biological differences in the ways the brains of introverts and extroverts work.

According to the literature on the subject, introverts have positive and valuable attributes. They are good at listening, planning, taking time for thought, focusing, concentrating on tasks for long, uninterrupted periods of time. They can form strong and intimate bonds with people. They can act independently, listen well, can step back from a situation to analyze it,

and can persevere and be loyal.

Yet, says Laney, introversion is "pathologized" in our society and labelled as anti-social. "We live in a culture that has a negative attitude about reflection and solitude," says the psychologist. "Introverts aren't anti-social—they are just social in a different way."

Introverts thrive in the inner world of thought and ideas and in close, intimate relationships. Extroverts thrive in the outer world of interaction and large, constant social exchange.

That would naturally reflect what both groups like and dislike as learners.

Juggling the differences in the classroom can be perilous, though, like Gulliver trying to navigate the conflict between whether it is right to break an egg at the big end or the little end. Both sides see the world from their end of the egg.

But it is extroversion that is praised and rewarded in our society, and the classroom sometimes mirrors the social values of society by favouring extroverts, who naturally dominate socially because they are three-quarters of the population and are skilful in dominating socially. That may be amplified if the teacher is an extrovert and the extroverted students assert their power.

An extroverted classroom can be a lively and energetic public forum with a group of people interacting, conversing, thinking spontaneously. It is fast paced, changing direction frequently, with distractions, noise and high stimulation. Marks, favours and other rewards are given for extroverted participation and those who don't participate the way that extroverts do can be neglected or singled out.

All this has an effect. I see that my introverted university students have been burdened for years in grade school and high school with a sense of shame and alienation as introverts for not fitting the social mould of teachers and students who are extroverts. Tasks in learning that require extroversion are harder and more stressful for them. They don't like large group activities and they don't like being put on the spot and forced to say what is on their minds.

And there is nothing wrong with that. It is perfectly normal for what we now know about the temperament, brain chemistry and brain physiology that explain the differences between introverts and extroverts.

Knowing all this is ultimately relevant to the sense of understanding and well-being that a student needs in order to learn. For example, here's a response from a former university student, a mature, thoughtful and highly intelligent young woman, when I suggested that she read, after her graduation, Laney's book *The Introvert Advantage*.

Marti Olsen Laney's book moved me to tears—of recognition and relief—more than once. I have been reassessing myself and my past through a new perspective where I no longer feel ashamed or embarrassed for things I have (or haven't) done, and ways I've reacted in social settings. Even my mother—who is introverted herself—pressured me as a child to be more social, and suggested something was wrong for wanting to spend time quietly or alone. I recall her knocking on my bedroom door and confronting me on the Saturday afternoons I decided to stay in my room and read or write or play a game. She thought this meant I was having problems with the other children at school, or that I was depressed. As an adult, I've felt guilt and anxiety over taking time for myself, wondering if I was agoraphobic or would suddenly become a recluse... Had I known more about introversion before going to university, I feel I would have been more confident in, and accepting of, myself. There is something quite liberating about knowing that needing time alone to "recharge" is typical of introverts—not of sociopaths, recluses or "weirdos."

This student went on to do an advanced degree in nursing and will probably make a strong contribution to society.

My own motivation to do something about the situation came from the crisis of having to deal with students having difficulty with group activity in a university course that I taught about newspaper production.

The first year that I sensed that a preference for introversion could affect the group activity of the class, I did a short survey from Laney's book which indicated that almost fifty per cent of the class was strongly introverted and only fifteen per cent was strongly extroverted, a remarkable situation that confirmed my intuition. This mix could be expected to affect how the class functioned as a group.

For comparison, I did the same survey the same year with my photojournalism class and found that thirty per cent of the class was strongly introverted, ten per cent was strongly extroverted and sixty per cent was in the middle. That would affect how photography assignments were done since the emphasis was put on interacting with people to take their photos. I also noted how different the two classes were in terms of introversion and extroversion and expected the dynamics would be different between them.

The following year, I did a survey of the newspaper production course using elements of preferences found in the literature of introversion and extroversion. That year, thirty-eight per cent reported they were strong introverts, which was a drop from the previous year, but still higher in introversion than the general population.

That year and the next year I expanded the surveys to explore how comfortable the students were with group work in various ways. Those results could have been affected by other factors, such as the way the university makes learning an individual competition that pits student against student and scepticism among students that everyone will do his or her fair share of the work in a group activity. But the point is that instead of insisting on group work, I was considering how well students could adapt to it and how that affected what they were learning in the course.

In the third year of surveys I asked if the students would like to work on a publication as a group. The feedback was a dramatic divide that felt like a stand-off, since fifty per cent said yes, forty per cent said they

would like to work on their own and ten per cent had no preference. In this class, fifty per cent said they like to listen and observe quietly and fifty per cent said they like to talk and engage others in conversation.

I wondered how structured I should make the course and how flexible it should be to change. The survey showed another stand-off, with forty per cent preferring an orderly, planned structured environment, fifty per cent preferring an environment open to spontaneity and change and ten per cent with no preference.

The mere fact of doing the surveys—perhaps a sign of my own introversion—made me pay more attention to the variety in the preferences of my students and the way my courses could reflect that variety. It made me aware of what differences there could be in the dynamics of a class from year to year.

I wondered if the same course material could be delivered in different ways at the same time to students with different preferences, particularly towards introversion and extroversion, which affect deeply the motivation of the students and their sense of well-being and integrity.

After several years, I settled on the option of letting the students decide whether to work in small groups of their own choosing or to work individually, which seems to produce the most satisfying results.

Courses like these were also a challenge for me personally as an introvert who has to interact with extroverts in the classroom and extroverted colleagues outside the classroom. Even writing this article on introversion was distressing for me because it trig-

gered memories of feelings of having to cope with situations in the past. I have to “build up steam” before I can launch myself into a classroom, especially one with new students. Now I know why I even put off writing this article for several years.

The literature on introversion recognizes these kinds of issues and helps by providing strategies.

Carl Jung, the introverted psychologist who gave us our basic understanding of introversion and extroversion, believed that one personality type of either introversion or extroversion dominates in the individual, but the other type is still within us and can be balanced and developed against its opposite without needing to dominate unnaturally.

The insights of Jung were developed into the popular Myers-Briggs personality types. Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers adapted Jung’s character types of introversion and extroversion by classifying people by four categories of opposites, beginning with introversion and extroversion, producing sixteen combinations of character types. There is only space in this article to deal with introversion.

For teachers, there is a book by Gordon Lawrence devoted to the topic of educating introverts and extroverts, called *People Types and Tiger Stripes*, originally published in 1979 and available online through the Center for Applications of Psychological Type. Lawrence says that teaching attracts introverts, that extroverts and introverts are equally represented at all levels of teaching, and that college students are more evenly divided



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between introverts and extroverts, unlike the general population where extroverts dominate in numbers. He also says that the personality types are seen in how the individual organizes his or her energy and that they affect motivation, interests, learning styles and aptitudes.

In order to help introverts in my classes, I've given students self-reflective assignments where they have the option of writing about the experience if they want, which helps them, as well as helping me to understand the process of learning for them. This was particularly useful with assignments involving interviewing or photography. I find that introverts want to write about this, whereas extroverts find this kind of introspection annoying and pointless and perhaps even stressful.

Here are some strategies for helping introverted students, from *The Introvert Advantage and People Types and Tiger Stripes*, with a few tweaks from me:

- Give the students options in assignments and classroom activities that allow introverts and extroverts to choose which helps them learn and develop best. One option is allowing students to choose whether to work in groups or individually.
- Give introverts the time to process information and respond later. They need time to process information at their own speed and a private space without distractions and overwhelming stimulus.
- Allow written dialogue and interaction, which now work well with computers, cell phones, the Internet and social media.
- Break the assignments into multiple, staged smaller assignments, since introverts can be overwhelmed by deadlines and the way they think at length about large tasks.
- Give introverts breaks to restore their energy.
- Give the introverts privacy by letting them keep the results of their work private.
- Be aware that tests favour extroverts, and disadvantage introverts. Introverts need conditions that allow them to focus and concentrate without distractions, tasks that allow them time to process information, which suggests they learn better with long-term assignments than tests with surprise questions. (I remember that when I was a university student I adjusted for this situation by trying to predict questions before a test and writing out the answers beforehand.)
- Give the introverts strategies for interacting with people, such as preparing a script beforehand. Introverts are stressed by having to interact with others verbally in spontaneous situations, including talking on the phone, and by having to attend long meetings with large groups. Being able to take notes helps them adjust.
- Give the students work with cameras. Like taking notes, cameras allow introverts to mediate with the world in a separate, reflective way and, at the same time, give them a framework for developing interaction and social skills.

- Empower introverts with the awareness that they have the right to set boundaries that make them feel comfortable dealing with others.


There are those who might argue that giving introverts some introverted options undermines the challenges they need in order to grow and avoids the kind of conditions in the outer world where they have to cope with situations that favour extroverts.

My response is that we want to create the best conditions possible for learning. We can be optimistic and believe that, given the right support, students will naturally take challenges and develop when they are ready.

In the end, we want to bolster the strengths of introverted students without them being disadvantaged in the classroom, but at the same time to give them strategies for adjusting to an extroverted world. Eventually the introverted students need to learn extroverted skills, but the extroverted students need to learn introverted skills too, and so do teachers.

Shawn Thompson is an assistant professor of journalism and communication at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, BC. His latest book is *The Intimate Ape: Orangutans and the Secret Life of a Vanishing Species*. (2010) The behaviour of orangutans is introverted compared to the extroverted chimpanzees and gorillas. Email: sthompson@tru.ca





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