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A Quiet Revolution: Teaching Introverted Learners

by Cara Meixner

Several years ago, I savored a brief [TED Talk](#) by Susan Cain, author of [Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking](#). Cup of chai in hand, I engaged with Cain's talk as if it were a tête-à-tête, often pausing to reflect on her musings on introversion.

Drawn from Jungian psychology, introversion and extraversion are preferences toggled by our nature, but strengthened by nurture. Simply put, introverts derive their energy from an orientation to the inner world, whereas extraverts are charged by engagement in the outside world. We favor one preference over the other, yet some of each exists in all of us. The inclusion challenge, as Cain surmises, is that introverts are tethered to and judged by a world that privileges extraversion. Herein, introverts are often misunderstood to be shy or fearful—when they tend to savor solitude and favor sanctuary.

Instructional trends privileging extraverted behavior can present challenges for students with introverted preferences. Participation in fast-paced discussions, for instance, is often difficult for inward-thinking students. Worse, other learners may not gain the benefit of introverts' contributions. Cain explains, "At the risk of sounding grandiose, it is the world's loss because when it comes to creativity and to leadership, we need introverts doing what they do best."

So, what *do* introverts do best? And what do introverted learners need from us, their instructors? The ideas below explore both of these questions with attention to actionable strategies that can be used across courses.

- Many introverts are *deep thinkers*. When posing a question for classroom discussion, offer learners time to collect their thoughts on index cards. Then, invite dialogue—or allow students to swap cards, responding in writing, or orally, to their neighbor's thoughts. This strategy isn't just good for introverts; according to [Zakrajsek \(2017\)](#), it'll also help others who are reluctant to speak, like some English-language learners, chronically shy students, and those who have had embarrassing classroom experiences.
- Think of introverts as *contributors*, not *participators*. For a nimble-minded extravert, earning "speaking" points toward a classroom participation grade may be less intimidating than to an introspective introvert. Consider a variety of ways to evaluate students' contributions, like collecting "exit cards" at the end of class. According to a study by [Patka et al. \(2016\)](#), exit cards are vital indicators of student learning, course-related challenges, experiences with peers, and more. I often pre-print "exit cards" with prompts that students respond to during the last 5-8 minutes of class, such as:

- 1) What's something (e.g., a point, an idea, a question, or an experience) you might add to

today's class session? Why is that important to you?

- 2) What content or topic remains unclear? What action will you take between today and the next class session to understand this better?
- 3) What else would you like your instructor to know about today's class experience?

- In teams and groups, allow others to *practice* introversion. For those devotees of team learning practices, this post is not meant to suggest that introverts do not learn well in collaborative settings. [Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning \(POGIL\)](#) is among the few evidential team learning practices that privileges introversion by engaging students in seven [process skills](#), like self-assessment and metacognition.

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