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Inclusive Education for Introverts

**Abstract:**

This research essay looks at introverted students in the twenty-first-century classroom. Some studies have been done looking into personality traits and learning styles associated with introversion and extraversion, like those lead by Baruch Offir and Shaheen Parveen. Educators like Melissa DuBrowa, Emma Lowry, and Shelly Schmidt have written articles voicing their opinions and observations on introverts in the classroom. The goal of this paper is to bring those studies and articles together to give current and future educators ideas on how to make their classrooms more inclusive to all students.

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Walk into a classroom today and one thing you are likely to see is cooperative and communication-based learning, both large pieces of the twenty-first-century classroom. While these are vital skills to being successful in today’s world, a sole reliance on these techniques for teaching risks alienating a large portion of students. Extroverts thrive in the interactive classroom, but introverts often do not have the same experience. Teachers should create an environment conducive to learning for students of all personality types: an environment that fosters learning and challenges students without making them feel targeted or unworthy. This paper will address what introversion and extroversion are, what classrooms today look like, how introverted and extroverted students best learn, and a number of methods a teacher can use to create a more inclusive learning environment.

I would like to start my discussion by looking at what exactly being an introvert or extrovert means and what implications each personality type has. Introverts “thrive in environments that are not over-stimulating,” “tend to enjoy quiet concentration,” and spend more time listening than speaking (Lowry, 18). In contrast, extroverts “are energized by social situations and tend to be assertive multi-taskers who think out loud” (18). Shelly Schmidt explains to us that extroversion is America’s “cultural ideal,” but she desires for teachers to bring out the best in all students and embrace introvert traits.

Before getting into ways to accommodate introverts in the classroom, it helps to see what today’s classrooms look like and the benefits that come with it. Many schools and classrooms are adopting Twenty-First-Century Skills: Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Communication, and Creativity. Two of these four pieces, collaboration and communication, are more easily accomplished by extroverts as they involve social interaction, and while some might believe that creativity is more of an introverted trait, a 2012 study showed no correlation between creativity and introversion (Parveen and Ramzan). The push for collaboration and communication is beneficial in our current global society in which some of the top skills employers are looking for include leadership, communication, and teamwork. While it is important for students to understand and develop these skills, the sole reliance on collaboration and communication in primary and secondary education can have a negative impact on introverted students, especially if the only ways these skills are taught are through class discussion and group work.

In order to understand how to create an inclusive environment for introverted students, it helps to know what both introverted and extroverted students find most helpful in the classroom. A 2007 study concerning the impact of personality types on students’ success rates in a class taught via videoconference concluded that introverted students achieved higher than their extroverted peers in the distance-learning environment (Offir). While I am focusing on the physical classroom, this study included student feedback about the class that is helpful in understanding how each personality type learns. The feedback revealed the extroverted students disliked the separation from the lecturer and felt the learning was less personal. Some of the extroverted students said, “You cannot say things spontaneously” and “cannot speak freely” which caused them to loose interest in the lecture (Offir, 15). Introverts prefer a “flowing lecture” and therefor liked the level of concentration the class allowed and lack of interruption, one also claiming, “Because the lecturer is forced to speak slowly, you can also write, the students’ concentration increases, the material is more organized” (16). This tells us that extroverts like lots of interaction and would not mind if the conversation started to deviate from the lesson, whereas introverts prefer more direction in the lesson and to concentrate more.

To create a more inclusive environment for both personality types, there are a number of things teachers can do. One thing a teacher can do is schedule silent times in the class. According to Emma Lowry, an educator, “One aspect that is often missing when focusing on the collaborative learning environment however, is that of ‘solitude’” (19). Scheduled times of solitude will not only address introverted students’ need for quiet and independent work time, but it will give extroverted students a chance to become more self-reflective and work on what challenges them individually (Lowry). Introverts feel higher energy levels during self-reflection and time alone, so constantly being forced into group work or large group discussion can have a draining effect on these students and they can easily feel exhausted by school. Having solitude work time will give these students a chance to recharge and become more focused. Teachers can implement silence in a few ways. One of the ways I personally have seen teachers use, both in my time as a student and through classroom observation, is to start the class with a quiet time to complete bell-work or a journal question that relates to that day’s lesson. Teachers can also offer students, when and if the time is available, a silent work day when working on larger individual projects. Silence is beneficial to both introverts and extroverts because it is key in developing deep thinking (Lowry), which can help students improve their critical thinking, one of the important Cs of twenty-first-century skills. There are some conflicts with this method, though, in that teachers have limited time to get through the planned lesson, but even giving students those few minutes at the beginning of class can help them prepare for the lesson ahead. Even if teachers don’t have a few extra minutes, students can benefit from being given a five to ten second wait time after a teacher asks even a simple question (Schmidt, 74). This brief bit of silence can have the same effect on a smaller scale.

Another method teachers can use in their classrooms is to have students complete online discussions. This will help students build communications skills, but in a medium that is more comfortable and accessible for introverted students. Teachers have a number of options, “from course blogs to TodaysMeet to Twitter to a myriad of other free and reasonably priced tools” (Schmidt, 74). Online discussions are also a way for introverted students to show teachers that, even if they are not speaking in class, they are still listening (74). Teachers can require students to submit a summary of the class discussion, which would also “help extroverts focus on honing their listening skills” (74), who may get caught up in the discussion and loose track of the teacher’s message. Students can also complete online journals, which are “especially helpful for Introverts because it allows the conversation to be private” between the teacher and student (DuBrowa, 61). By moving some discussions online, teachers can save time in class and it will benefit students to develop more professional online communication skills. Although, there might be some students may have limited time and Internet access outside of class. In cases like these, teachers may choose to avoid online discussions or work with those specific students to find a compromise or alternative.

Although these first two methods are very helpful and inclusive, it is still necessary to have group work and live in-class discussions. However, there are ways to make these more accessible for introverted students. Think-Pair-Share is a method that many teachers are using and is being taught to future educators in college education classes. This method involves posing a question to students, having them first think about it and silently start to form their own answers, then having them discuss their answers with a neighbor, and finally moving it to a larger class discussion (Schmidt, 74). After having shared their ideas out loud with one or two other people, “introverted students may now feel more comfortable contributing to the larger class discussion” (74). Think-Pair-Share can be time consuming, and therefor might not be used for every class discussion, although it is an effective method and should be used when possible. Beyond helping ease introverts into large group discussions, Think-Pair-Share also helps create a more cohesive classroom environment. As I can attest to from my own experience, it helps students become more familiar and comfortable with one another, introverts and extroverts alike.

Teachers may also consider using a “flipped” or “inverted” classroom, like how Melissa DuBrowa describes in her article “Extroverts and Introverts and 8am… Oh my!” DuBrowa would assign readings at the end of class to be read by the next class, when she would lead with a brief introduction to the reading and ask questions that lead into either large or small group discussion then move to the lesson activity for the day. After the activity, students would complete an online journal on Blackboard. DuBrowa says, “By chunking our lessons into ‘input, process and output’ segments, and by dividing activities into in-class and out-of-class events, we can better maximize our time on task and invite students into the learning events that we design” (61). Inverted classrooms help introverts (and extroverts) feel more prepared since they will have the reading ahead of time and will have an idea about what the next lesson will contain. DuBrowa also noted that while the extroverts in her class were always the first to respond in class, the introverts would gradually join the discussion.

Another way to help introverts feel more comfortable with large group discussions is to assign questions ahead of time then have “rotations so that all students are required to respond” (Lowry, 74). This gives students time to prepare answers and give more thoughtful and insightful responses. If teachers want to challenge students a little more, they can assign days for students to bring their own discussion questions. Either way it is important that teachers “not only assess the quantity of what [is] shared, but also the quality (74). Having a rotation or schedules of respondents or questioners can work well in conjunction with an inverted classroom, as it will help students focus on assignments or readings more carefully and closely.

Finally, when it comes to small group work, there are a couple of things teachers can do to get the most out of their students. First, before having students get into groups, have students have time for individual creation, as “research indicates the idea creation is done best individually” (Lowry). This time will help work towards the creativity aspect of the four Cs of Twenty-First-Century Skills. Also, by having each person come to the group with their own developed ideas, it will help groups not fall victim to just going along with the ideas of the loudest voices (Lowry). When moving students into groups, the best approach is to “have small groups of two or three, and clear roles for each student” (21). This will help students know exactly what is expected of each of them and will make sure everyone does an equal share of work. It will also save time and help avoid conflicts as students will not have to navigate the who-is-doing-what conversation. More structured and well-managed small groups will overall be more effective and efficient for introverts and extroverts alike.

Every class will have introverts and extroverts. Which personality students fall under can have an effect on how they learn and many of today’s classrooms are more conducive to extroverted students. There are a number of ways that teachers can make their classrooms more accessible and inclusive to introverted students, whether it is through silence, online discussions, Think-Pair-Share, inverted classrooms or any of the other methods discussed in this paper. Teachers can use any one or combination of these methods to create a more inclusive classroom to students of all personality types.

Works Cited

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