Teaching Class Discussion to Introverts and Extroverts

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Part I

Why do some students contribute frequently to class discussions, while others speak up only rarely? Anyone who has taught a seminar-style class has probably wrestled with this conundrum. As instructors, we know that seminars can be exhilarating experiences when they engage everyone in the room, yet all too often they involve only a fraction of the class. How can we reach these quiet students?

Educational theorists point to a number of different factors that can affect student participation, including the amount of student preparation, the size and arrangement of the classroom, how participation is graded, student levels of confidence or classroom apprehension, and differences arising from race, gender, or culture (Rocca, 2010).

In my own teaching, however, I’ve also had some success drawing on the insights of personality psychology. I’ve found two categories particularly useful: extroversion and introversion.

Many will be familiar with these categories from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a popular personality test often used by career counselors. Extroverts, according to this theory, draw their energy from social interaction, and as a result, are often outspoken and gregarious. Introverts, by contrast, find social interactions draining and need time alone to recharge their energy. This is not to say that introverts are necessarily antisocial, nor should we conflate introversion with shyness. Many introverts become great public speakers, performers, or leaders, but they always need solitude afterwards to recharge. The two personality types also tend to prefer different kinds of social interactions. Whereas extroverts thrive in large groups and in the company of strangers, introverts often seek out one-on-one conversations or intimate gatherings with a few good friends.

I have long found this theory personally useful, but I never thought to connect it to education until I picked up a copy of Susan Cain’s recent book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking* (2012). Cain argues that introverts and extroverts also prefer different thinking styles. In keeping with their outward-oriented nature, extroverts like to bounce their ideas off of other people, using discussion as a way to test out rudimentary notions and see where they develop. Introverts, by contrast, do much of their best thinking alone. They prefer to work out problems in their heads before seeking feedback, and they sometimes find meetings distracting. Neither style is necessarily better or worse than the other; in fact, a healthy institution needs some of both. The best ideas benefit from exposure to outside perspectives and criticisms. At the same time, too much extroversion can lead to a pernicious “groupthink,” where charisma triumphs over substance.
Cain draws this distinction within the context of her larger argument, which is that American society routinely discriminates on the basis of personality. Our culture has come to view extroversion as a universal ideal, despite the fact that introverts make up from a third to a half of our population. This attitude informs everything from our hiring decisions, to our choice of role models, our parenting strategies, and the design of our institutions—including educational institutions. American schools and universities, she argues, place a much higher heavier emphasis on class discussion than those in many other countries. This orientation favors students who can think on their feet out loud, pitch their ideas to others, and work collaboratively in groups. In the worst-case scenario, we may even conflate extroversion with academic ability.

Such biases are especially worrisome at a multicultural university like Stanford, because they can potentially verge on a form of cultural discrimination. Not all societies, Cain reminds us, share our American fascination with extroversion. What happens when a student from a culture that reveres introversion as a norm enters an American classroom?

Stanford cultural psychologist Heejung Kim explored this question in a 2002 experiment conducted right here on the Farm. Kim recruited several dozen Stanford undergraduates and asked them to take a series of simple logic puzzles. Unbeknownst to the students, she specifically selected participants from two target demographics. While all of the participants spoke English as their first language, half were second-generation East Asian Americans, while the other half were Caucasian students with third- or older-generation European ancestry. Both groups performed similarly under control conditions, where they were allowed to solve the puzzles in any manner they chose. But when asked to work while vocalizing their thought processes out loud, the Asian American students tended to answer fewer questions correctly.

Kim speculates that cultural differences might help to explain this disparity. In the West, she suggests, we have a long tradition—philosophical as well as cultural—of conflating thinking with speaking. Yet many East Asian cultures tend instead to associate learning with introspection: attitudes that—like the American fondness for extroversion—are deeply encoded in their schools, families, and institutions. Although born in the United States, second-generation Asian American students may continue to internalize these norms through the practices they grew up with in their families. In short, an individual’s preference for thinking silently or out loud may have cultural roots, cemented through years of socialization.

Cain herself lends further weight to this hypothesis in her book, where she examines the much more introverted norms that prevail within the heavily Asian-American high schools and communities of Cupertino. Many of these students, she shows, face difficulties transitioning to more extroverted universities like Stanford, where they encounter teachers and peers that expect more exuberant classroom behavior.

Of course these kinds of sweeping cultural generalizations are difficult to substantiate and can easily be carried too far. Yet given Stanford’s commitment to cultivating a diverse student body, they ought at least to give us pause. Are our methods of instruction and
assessment fair? Do our classrooms give both introverts and extroverts opportunities to contribute in their uniquely valuable ways, or do they force every student to conform to the model of a single personality type?

Part II

Why do some students remain quiet during class discussions? As we saw in Part I, personality type may play an important role. For all of its many advantages, a seminar class is a quintessentially extroverted institution: it requires students to think out loud in front of relatively large groups, and it favors those who are most comfortable learning by bouncing ideas off of others. Those who thrive instead in intimate conversations with one or a few people, who do their best thinking alone, and who prefer to work out ideas thoroughly before soliciting feedback, may find this environment distracting and intimidating.

In short, introverts face additional challenges in seminar classrooms that their more extroverted peers do not. And without understanding the reason for these difficulties, some students may simply assume that they are not as intelligent as their classmates and check out of the discussion altogether. This is a triple tragedy: it undermines the student’s academic self-confidence, it deprives them of a valuable learning opportunity, and it deprives the class as a whole of a potentially valuable voice. For even the quietest students can often change the direction of a discussion with a single, thoughtful remark.

What can we as teachers do to make seminars more accessible to introverts? Here are a number of techniques that I have developed in my own teaching, as a postdoctoral instructor in the Thinking Matters program and its predecessor, IHUM:

1. **Introduce the concepts of introversion and extroversion to your students.** I typically do this during the first day of class, as part of introductions and walking through course policies. Without validating one style over the other, I explain their various strengths and weaknesses and the challenges that both personality types face during class discussion. One of my major aims here is to give students a non-normative tool for understanding their experiences in the seminar. College students—especially the intense, academically-oriented students who make it into Stanford—often tend to interpret any difficulties they encounter in the classroom as proof of their general intellectual inadequacy. The resulting blow to their self-confidence can further reduce their willingness to participate and take risks (Dweck, 2002).

2. **Devise a way of grading class participation that validates both personality styles.** If we wish to prevent students from conflating extroversion with academic ability, we must also make good on this promise as teachers. We cannot simply assign participation grades based on how often they speak. In my own teaching, I try to get a sense for each student’s preferred style of participation, and to find ways of evaluating how conscientiously or effectively they contributed through this style. If a student tends to speak only once or twice a class, but makes comments that are thoughtful and build skillfully upon what others have said, I award him a high grade. If a student feels
comfortable speaking up, but routinely ignores what others in the room are saying. I give her a lower grade. After all, we want to help extroverts cultivate their gift for effective leadership, not simply reward them for their loquacity. I take care to explain these criteria to my students at the outset, so as to make it clear that I respect their personality style not only in word, but also in deed.

3. Challenge students to try experimenting with the opposite style. While I want to make students feel comfortable in discussion, I also want to encourage them to try practicing the opposite style. Just as a healthy institution benefits from having a mix of extroverts and introverts, I think it is useful for individuals to develop some fluency with both styles, so long as they don’t feel pressured on a regular basis to suppress their native inclination.

When introducing the personality styles to my students, therefore, I also talk a bit about their liabilities. Introverts can easily succumb to perfectionism when they insist too strongly on withholding their ideas from others until they have fully formed them in their minds. Most ideas benefit from exposure to multiple perspectives, even—or especially—in their early stages. Learning how to seek feedback from others, and to feel comfortable sharing even half-baked notions to see where they might lead, is an extremely valuable skill that everyone should practice.

Extroverts, for their part, can sometimes get so carried away sharing their own ideas that they forget to pay attention to other voices in the room. Learning how to listen effectively to others, and to formulate responses that build upon their contributions, is an equally valuable skill, and one that often comes more naturally to introverts. In short, everyone can benefit from practicing a bit of the opposite style. We may not be able to alter our fundamental temperament, but it can’t hurt to learn a few tricks from the other camp.

4. Reinforce all these concepts through one-on-one conversations. Students easily forget many of the things you introduce on the first day, so whenever possible, I try to find subsequent opportunities to speak them individually about their personality style. I teach in Thinking Matters, where we have the luxury of meeting with all of our students in one-on-one tutorials throughout the quarter, but an impromptu chat after class or in office hours works as well. At the very least, I try to identify those students who never speak and make it a priority to contact them.

I use these meetings to ask students what they find challenging about discussion and whether either of the personality styles I described matches their experience. I repeat my assurances about grading, and I strategize with them a bit about how to contribute more effectively through their preferred style, while also encouraging them to try experimenting with the opposite style. Educational theorists call this technique building metacognitive awareness: that is, helping students become conscious not only of the material they are learning, but also of their learning process.

5. Incorporate classroom activities that play to the strengths of introverts.
Even with all of my coaching and preparation, some students still find it difficult to insert themselves into the free-for-all of a full class discussion. For that reason, I regularly include classroom activities that play more to the strengths of introverts. My favorite technique is to break the class down into small groups of two to four students for part of the hour. Usually I do this near the beginning of class, and I often let these mini-discussions run for fifteen to twenty minutes. During this time, I circulate slowly from group to group, listening in and making mental notes of topics to address when the larger group reconvenes. Occasionally I jump in and do some side coaching when a group appears to be stuck, but I try to minimize my interventions as much as possible.

Sometimes I give the groups structured tasks to perform: for instance, to come up with a pair of discussion questions to bring back to the entire class for consideration. Other times, however, I leave them free to discuss any ideas or questions that occurred to them while doing the reading for the day—an activity I call my “pump-priming” exercise. Once the time is up, or I feel that the groups have accomplished their tasks, I reconvene the full class and ask each group to share a couple of their most interesting questions or discussion topics. From there, we move into a full-group discussion for the rest of the hour.

These breakout groups serve a number of pedagogical purposes, not all of which have to do with introversion and extroversion. For instance, I borrowed the idea of a “pump-priming” exercise from improvisational theater, where actors typically play a series of simple, non-threatening warm-up games before attempting to perform fully improvised scenes (see for instance, Johnstone, 1992). In a similar sense, I was looking for a way to overcome the gridlock that often occurs at the beginning of seminars. When students first walk into class, it has often been hours or days since they read the material. Hitting them up immediately with focused questions often results in silence and consternation. The pump-priming exercise gives them the space they need to get the material back in their heads, without worrying as much about the need to “perform” for me or their peers. Most of my students seem to enjoy this activity, and I’m constantly amazed at how lively and productive these small groups can be without my oversight.

But I also use small groups because they give introverts a chance to contribute in an environment more conducive to their personality style. As we have seen, introverts often thrive best in intimate conversations with one or a few people, rather than in large groups. I have often observed students who rarely speak in front of the entire class open up in these smaller settings and become quite talkative. When a quiet student does this, I will usually give her a strong participation grade for the day, even if she declines to contribute to the full group discussion. After all, she is engaging seriously with the class in the style most comfortable for her.

Small groups can also give introverts the chance they need to polish their ideas before launching them into the free-for-all of a full-class discussion. I’ve spoken to many quiet students who’ve told me that they rarely speak up in class because they find it difficult to react quickly enough to match the pace of our discussions. By the time they’ve formulated a thought, the group has already moved on to something else. Small groups
give these students a chance to preview some of the topics we may end up discussing later as a class, and to arrive at the big group discussion already armed with some ideas to share.

There may be other ways of achieving this goal as well. I’ve spoken to colleagues who make students write impromptu journal entries at the beginning of class, or submit written ideas and questions in advance. Both of these strategies would also give introverts the time they need to plan ahead and formulate ideas in their minds.

**Conclusion**

Many factors influence the outcome of a seminar, and it is never easy to evaluate whether a particular teaching strategy had the effect one hoped it would. Nevertheless, since I started using these techniques, I have seen my participation levels rise considerably. In fact, over the past year I have been able to involve every single one of my students in at least some capacity on nearly every day of class.

I’ve also received positive feedback on these techniques from numerous students. Two even took the time to contact me long after our course had ended, to tell me that they were continuing to use the concepts of introversion and extroversion to help them make sense of their learning experiences in subsequent courses. As teachers, what more could we ask for?

**Further Reading:**


