

Recognizing the differences between shy and introverted students

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Workshops on how to encourage class participation are a staple of teaching and learning centres across the country. However, little of that advice is geared to the needs of an oft-neglected subset of introverted university students: the ones who aren't shy.

Even though Susan Cain's book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, was a bestseller, and her TED Talk has been viewed more than 10 million times, I'm not sure that our postsecondary teaching and learning community has fully appreciated its implications.

If we want to encourage all of our students to participate in class, we have to accept that shy students are not necessarily introverted. And introverts are not necessarily shy.

Shyness is a form of social anxiety. Shy students often want to participate in class discussions, but they worry about how they will come across, or what others will think of what they have to say. Bringing these students out of their shells typically requires empathy, trust-building, and – most importantly – a focus on self-efficacy. Instructors have to identify and develop relationships with their shyer students, help them realize that they have valuable insights to contribute, and encourage them to speak out.

The advice on how to manage shyness is ubiquitous, research-based and reliable. Most of it will emphasize some, if not all, of the following themes:

- Be open and inviting.
- Treat each student as an individual.
- Be clear about why you ask for participation in the classroom.
- Be transparent about what you mean by participation.
- Be flexible by offering a diversity of methods and means for contributing.
- Start the academic acclimatization process as early as possible.
- Provide clear and honest feedback on individual contributions to classroom learning throughout the term, not just at the end.

Unfortunately, not all of these strategies will resonate with every introvert. The problem is in the premise: that there is a psychological barrier preventing participation, and that if the barrier is removed, the behaviour will change.

Introverts find group conversations physically – rather than primarily psychologically – exhausting. Self-aware introverts might therefore make a conscious choice not to participate in class discussions even though they have lots to say. When they do speak, it tends to be at the end when they have had ample time to reflect.

The issue, then, is not always self-efficacy; these introverts are not worried about the adequacy of their views. They aren't necessarily concerned about how their peers, or instructor, might respond to their interventions. Rather, their behaviour is about self-preservation in a physiological sense.

Particularly if they have multiple classes or other social engagements in a single day, they might choose to conserve their energy by staying quiet. In doing so, they knowingly accept the academic consequences (like a lower participation grade) as the cost of self-preservation.

There is significantly less research, and advice, on how to encourage participation from individuals with this mindset. Indeed, in my experience, a focus on self-efficacy can be self-defeating: by convincing introverts that they have meaningful ideas to contribute, we also validate their general sense of judgment. If that judgment tells them to stay quiet, then they become even more comfortable in their silence.

In recent seminars, I have begun experimenting with two strategies. The first is intellectual. I explain that neither I, nor any individual course member, nor the assigned readings, can provide as great a diversity of thought as a group of individuals reacting in real-time. Put simply, every voice counts.

I also make an ethical appeal. Regardless of whether introverts participate, they benefit from exposure to the ideas of their more outspoken colleagues. If you have the opportunity to learn from others, it seems only fair that you offer something in return. And if everyone waited until the end of class to speak, we could not sustain a discussion.

Whether my approach represents best practice is unclear, and my success rate is uneven. What is clear is that shyness and introversion are different phenomena. Certainly, many introverts are also shy, but not all of them are. It is therefore worth thinking about how we might adjust our approaches to encouraging class participation accordingly.

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