

Teaching While Introverted

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The most powerful self-revelation of my adult life occurred while I was eating a Cubano sandwich in a Florida strip mall. I was running some teaching workshops at a university in Fort Lauderdale and had an open slot for dinner. On the recommendation of my host, I walked from my hotel to a small Cuban restaurant nestled amid a random assortment of storefronts. As I usually do when I dine alone on the road, I brought a book.

Having ordered my sandwich, I opened up Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* and began reading. On page after page, I recognized myself with astonishment. For the first time in my life, I realized that personality traits about which

I had always felt some degree of shame were shared by a significant minority of the human species.

I learned, for example, that people like me need solitary time to recharge our batteries — even if we enjoy socializing with others. I realized that I could stop feeling guilty for making quick escapes from parties or campus social events — even when I loved everyone in the room and was enjoying the conversations. I discovered that plenty of people find prolonged eye contact a little uncomfortable. I finally understood why I hate small talk and don't relish meeting new people whom I am unlikely to ever see again.

I had always viewed those character traits as flaws, probably because the culture around me kept telling me they were. I absorbed that message unthinkingly: People who don't make eye contact are hiding something. Leaving a party without saying formal goodbyes to everyone is rude. Not wanting to speak to random strangers in the airport bar means I am closed off from new experiences or networking opportunities. Those of us who would rather sit and read our books than mix and mingle are antisocial, loners, weirdos.

Cain's book taught me that I had no reason to feel embarrassed anymore about these core features of my identity. In the weeks and months after I finished the book, I waved it in the faces of my extroverted friends, including my wife, whenever possible. "You've got to read this," I would tell them. "It'll make sense to you after you read it!" My wife's eyes received quite a workout in those months, so vigorously did they roll whenever I brought up the book.

But in spite of the profound ways in which *Quiet* helped me discover and accept the introverted parts of myself, I did not think about it very much in relation to my identity as a teacher. That changed when I read Jessamyn Neuhaus's book *Geeky Pedagogy: A Guide for Intellectuals, Introverts, and Nerds Who Want to Be Effective Teachers*, published last year as part of a series I edit for West Virginia University Press.

When Neuhaus pitched the book idea, two things hooked me immediately. The first was the elegance and wit of her writing, which was unlike anything else I had read in the frequently dry and humorless world of writing about teaching and learning in higher education. Her prose is razor sharp, her jokes are actually funny, and her mastery of pop culture knows no bounds. If you need a master class on how to adroitly work references to *The Simpsons*, *Star Trek*, or Harry Potter into your writing, Neuhaus has you covered.

But the book's more important appeal is its argument that those of us who identify as introverts, nerds, or geeks should both recognize the challenges those traits pose to our teaching and embrace the strengths they give us in the classroom.

I'll confess that, initially, I was drawn most to her descriptions of the way that introversion and teaching don't always make a natural fit. I love being in the classroom, and I love my students, and there are days when I am happy to chat with them after class or during office hours. But there are other days when I need to escape from social interaction in order to renew the energy I need to do any work. On those days, I make a beeline for my office and hope I don't see anyone — including friends and colleagues — for the next several hours.

As someone who has been writing about teaching for 20 years now, and directs a teaching center on my campus, I have always felt a little guilty about this part of myself — in the same way that I always felt guilty about slinking away from parties or campus social events. Neuhaus helped me recognize that my occasional need to marinate in the solitude of my office was the academic equivalent of escaping a party, wearing headphones on a plane, or spending long hours with my books.

Her description in *Geeky Pedagogy* of the rough mix between introversion and teaching gave me the same shock of recognition that I felt while reading *Quiet*.

"Teaching can be bewildering, discouraging, and tiring," Neuhaus writes. "So let me be absolutely clear on this point: I know you deeply love the subject you teach but you don't have to love every moment of teaching students about that subject in order to be effective and to help students learn. Teaching need not fill you with the same kind of ineffable joy and contentment you experience when you write code or read poetry or track data or study policy or make music or collect bark samples or whatever your vocation."

Geeky Pedagogy raises the very good question of why introverts would decide to pursue a profession like teaching, since the highly social nature of the classroom would pose obvious challenges. Yet introverts chose to teach anyway, and we continue to make that choice every semester. We do that, Neuhaus argues, because we love our subject matter so much that our enthusiasm spills beyond our individual selves. We are led into the classroom by a desire to share our intellectual passion and inspire others to see in our subject the same wonders and mysteries as we do.

But once in the classroom, we find ourselves facing a highly social situation, one that often conflicts with our introverted tendencies. That predicament leads to the core argument of Neuhaus's book: Because many geeks, introverts, and nerds — or GINs, in Neuhaus's coinage — do not shine naturally in social settings, and the classroom is a social setting, we have to work very deliberately to cultivate ourselves as effective teachers.

Most introverts aren't the kind of "super teacher" who connects automatically and easily with students. We might not possess a natural instinct for teaching, but that doesn't mean we can't be effective. What it means, instead, is that we have to think hard about our teaching, really do our homework, and labor continuously at it.

Of course, those tasks are perfectly suited to GINs. In the large and growing scholarship of teaching and learning, introverts can find a multitude of theories and practices to support us in our teaching, and GINs are nothing if not good at doing their homework. We love to sit down and tackle a thorny problem by doing all the research, trying different solutions, reflecting on them, and trying again. Those are our strengths, and if we choose to apply them to the challenge of teaching, they can help us become the most effective teachers possible.

After Neuhaus outlines those two premises, what follows in the remainder of the book is an excellent example of a GIN at work. She surveys the landscape of scholarship in teaching and learning to identify a half-dozen principles that help connect the personality of the GIN with effective teaching practices. She documents each principle with reams of scholarly sources, offers advice on difficult situations, and provides practical recommendations for how introverts can continue to evolve and improve in our teaching.

Many years ago, I was first drawn to the business of thinking and writing about teaching by Ken Bain, author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*. His book convinced me that college faculty members, no matter their discipline, had the obligation to ask themselves an intriguing scholarly question: How do you help another human being learn? I have never stopped finding that question fascinating and searching for new resources and ideas that can help me construct my own answer.

In today's educational climate, other crucial and equally fascinating questions have risen to the fore. How do we help all students feel welcome and supported on our campuses? How can higher education in general, and my classroom in particular, become an agent for changing the lives of first-generation or traditionally underrepresented students? How can we continue to evolve — as institutions and teachers — in the face of the rapid technological changes happening around us?

"Being an effective teacher," Neuhaus argues, "requires first and foremost learning how to be an effective teacher and then repeatedly relearning how to be an effective teacher."

Learning and relearning are necessary because the questions are so complex and evolve continuously with each new group of students, each new course, each new teaching context.

But that's what makes teaching the ideal playground for those of us who identify as geeks, introverts, or nerds. The college classroom raises hard and never-quite-soluble questions that require long-term thinking and experimentation — just what a GIN loves. "Don't ask me to make small talk with random strangers at social gatherings or even to call my best friends very often," Neuhaus writes. "But ask me to problematize, hypothesize, research, and reflect? Give me a homework assignment? Yes. Yes, please."

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