

TA Members and Friends,

As many of us experiment with active learning strategies, questions arise – as they should.

Among those questions for me is: “What would happen if 4 or 5 instructors were using these at the same time - instead of just a few doing mostly small experiments?”

Another is: “What about the many introverts in our classes?” There are still many students who much prefer to study alone and in isolation, despite what research now tells us best fosters true learning. I, for one, asked exactly two questions in class during my whole time in vet school. Moreover, at the end of almost every semester now, I make note that among the top 10-15 students in my class, I’ve never heard an inordinate percentage of them actually speak – or they speak only rarely.

This morning’s Faculty Focus newsletter (below) addresses the concern about introverts, and so I thought it worth pointing out – and thinking about.

Have a great week, S

Stephen A. Hines, DVM, PhD, DACVP
Professor of Veterinary Microbiology & Pathology
Director, CVM Teaching Academy

FACULTY FOCUS

HIGHER ED TEACHING STRATEGIES FROM MAGNA PUBLICATIONS

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[Keeping Introverts in Mind in Your Active Learning Classroom](#)

By Nicki Monahan, MEd

Introverts. Who are they and how do we ensure they thrive in active learning classrooms? If you have ever come to the midterm point of the semester and graded a stellar paper of a student whose name you don’t recognize and who has never raised her hand in class, you may have just identified an introvert in your classroom.

In every classroom there are a significant proportion of students who would identify themselves as introverts, if they understood what that term meant. Originally conceived by Carl Jung, the concepts of introversion and extroversion have been helpful ways of understanding basic differences in human temperament (Jung, 1970). Often confused with shyness, introversion is an aspect of personality which affects how we engage in social activity and our preferences for learning. Unlike extroverts, who typically are energized by social interaction, introverts can find connecting with large groups of unfamiliar people exhausting. They may have excellent social skills and enjoy meaningful friendships,

but are quite happy in their own company.

In an academic environment, introverts may prefer to work completely alone and discover their best ideas in solitude. They are likely to be comfortable in a lecture hall; listening and learning without the demands of engaging with others. But what we know about learning suggests that this passive mode of learning has its limitations, so many of us infuse our classrooms with more active learning strategies.

So how do we respect introverts' needs amidst all of this active learning? The very first class is an excellent time to establish participation norms and to create a classroom climate that supports introverts in their learning. An activity where students work with a partner is likely to fall within the comfort zone of even the most introverted student, and it still communicates that active participation is both an expectation and a benefit for learning. Whether it is having pairs of students review the syllabus and come up with questions for clarification, or inviting pairs to identify what they most want to learn in the course, working with a partner right from the beginning will create at least one personal contact for the introverted student who, left to his own devices, might sit through an entire semester completely on his own.

When students are expected to apply concepts, analyze material, or solve problems, small group learning activities might be the ideal strategy to implement. In small group discussions, introverts typically prefer to listen first, gather their thoughts before they speak, and may be gifted in synthesizing the ideas communicated by others. In an effort to support introverted students, some faculty members have adopted the practice of assigning roles to group members. However, be wary of always assigning the introvert the role of group recorder; this can inadvertently communicate that their ideas are not a valuable part of the activity.

As Susan Cain suggests in *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, it's not always the biggest talkers who have the best ideas! (Cain, 2012) When students are encouraged to explore and discover the variable skills of group members, they may come to the realization that the "quieter" member who takes time to process before speaking has unique contributions to the group's efforts. Well-designed small group learning experiences draw on the skills of all group members rather than creating situations where the most extroverted and gregarious students control the learning.

If your syllabus has a participation policy that rewards students for verbal comments made in large classes, consider the implications. For students who enjoy speaking in front of others and for whom talking out loud is a way of discovering what they are thinking, this can be an opportunity to gain "easy points." Unfortunately, we've all experienced the "overparticipator" who monopolizes the discussion without adding real value. On the other hand, there may be students who will never voluntarily raise their hand in a large lecture hall, yet do have contributions to make to the discussion.

Create learning and assessment strategies that recognize the various ways students can make quality contributions to their own and others' learning. Even a simple shift of giving students time to think and discuss a concept with a partner before throwing the conversation out to the large group can alter this dynamic. With time to think, and an opportunity to try an idea out with a partner, some students will be more willing to share with the large group. An online discussion environment is another avenue that gives students time to gather their thoughts before expressing them in writing. Given some choice and input, students might choose to have their participation grade based on verbal contributions in class, written responses in an online discussion forum, or a series of journals or reflection papers. Providing a range of opportunities for demonstrating "participation" and creating some flexibility and choice in how participation is assessed is a more equitable approach for all learners.

In many learning situations, introverts may need to stretch beyond their comfort zones, and they should be encouraged to do so, as should extroverts. Our goal is not to turn introverts into extroverts, or vice versa, but to

maximize learning for all students and to help them develop the skills often identified by potential employers — teamwork, problem solving, and interpersonal communication. When designing learning activities for your classroom, consider the key elements of balance and choice in order to create a comfortable learning environment which also encourages all students to stretch and take risks.

References:

Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Crown, 2012), 5

Carl G Jung, *Psychological Types* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971)

Nicki Monahan is a faculty facilitator in the Staff & Organizational Development Department at George Brown College, Toronto, Canada.