

# Responding to Quiet Students: Implications for Educators and Advisors

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**Abstract:** Quiet students seldom speak in class and rarely approach the instructor. Educators may find such students perplexing because it is difficult to discern if they are fostering such students' learning. This paper compares and contrasts introversion and shyness, explores ways in which quiet tendencies influence students' learning, and lastly, presents implications for teachers and advisors.

## Background

Introverts and extroverts are almost equally represented among undergraduate college students in most majors. A survey conducted by researchers at the Center for Applications of Psychological Type (CAPT) found that 40.6 % of the college students sampled were introverts (L. Abbitt, Librarian at CAPT, Nov. 4, 2012 telephone communication). Educators suggest that this estimate may actually be low because of the cultural stigma attached to introversion. Some students are unwilling to admit, even confidentially, their introversion tendencies.

Introversion and shyness can substantially affect students' social life on campus and influence the ways in which students prefer to receive and process information in the classroom. There is no question that introversion confers valuable strengths: introverts tend to be better than extroverts at thinking before they act, taking in and processing information thoroughly, remaining on task, and working more accurately. Their quiet nature and willingness to listen makes them easy to get along with. However, some introverts sometimes try so hard to appear more extroverted that they exhaust themselves, undervalue their own talents and allow themselves to be intimidated by the louder, more forceful extroverts in the classroom.

Providing a balanced mix of introvert-friendly and extrovert-friendly teaching and learning modalities seems fair to all concerned and is teaching in such a way to support social justice. Students who are highly introverted and/or shy will find classroom activities and assignments requiring extroverting behaviors unpleasant and difficult. Thus, the question arises of whether, or to what degree, it is in those students' best interest for faculty to compel them to participate in, and be graded on, exercises for which they are constitutionally ill-suited. Shyness experts note whoever designed the context of the modern classroom was certainly not thinking of the shy or quiet students or social justice within the classroom.

## Factors That May Underlie Quiet, Reticent Behaviors

Quiet, reticent behavior may be related to introversion, shyness, ethnic background, or some combination of the three. While introversion and shyness are often confounded, they are distinct from one another conceptually and in terms of behavior.

### Extroversion/Introversion

Following the early works of psychologist Carl Jung (1971), extroversion/introversion (also written *extraversion/intraversion*) is identified as a highly important dimension of human personality that imposes physiological limits on who we are and how we act - although behavior can vary according to circumstance. A given person's degree of extroversion or introversion

influences how that individual thinks, feels and interacts with the world at large (McLeod, 2010).

Other theorists have elaborated on, and in some cases, departed somewhat from Jung's theory. For example, Isobel Myers, who developed the MBTI, conceptualized extraversion and introversion as polar opposites in the Psychometric tests, e.g. the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)* (Myers & Briggs, 1980,1995) and the *Revised Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI)* are used to determine whether extraversion and introversion tendencies and to what extent. While Type is obvious in highly-introverted and highly extroverted people, it is not always so in slightly introverted individuals or in those who possess equal numbers of introverted and extroverted characteristics (*ambiversion*).

### **Cultural Background**

Quiet, reticent behavior may also be a function of cultural background. The United States is considered a highly extroverted nation with *individualistic* values; students are expected to distinguish themselves and are rewarded for doing so (Berden, Keane, & Calkins, 2008; Sparks, 2010). Its population however includes growing numbers of immigrants from *The Confucian-Belt*: China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam (Cain, 2012). Traditionally, such cultures share *collectivist* values that reward characteristics associated with introversion. Silence is seen as connoting seriousness and depth - one speaks only when one has something substantive to say, and only after careful consideration. The student role in traditional Asian culture is to sit quietly and takes notes while the professor does all the talking. Consequently, new immigrants and second generation Americans who've retained traditional Confucian-Belt values are often uncomfortable and at a disadvantage in American schools (Sparks, 2010).

### **Introverted and Shy Students in the Classroom**

Introverted and shy people are also distinct, from extroverts in terms of information processing, preferences regarding assignments and in-class activities, cognitive strengths and reward sensitivity.

#### **Information Processing and Problem Solving**

Introverted students prefer to process information inwardly, which means they would rather sit quietly in class and ponder lecture content (Varela, Cater, & Michel, 2012). Such learning should not be misconstrued as passive and unprepared; reflecting is as much an active process as discussing (Brookfield, 2012). Introverts learn via their internal processes, whereas extroverts benefit from having the opportunity to express new learning outwardly, in the form of oral communication.

Introverts' tendency to think carefully contributes to their ability to excel in what is known as *insightful problem solving*. Extroverts tend to spend less time thinking about problems; they are quicker to take action, and are thus prone to sacrificing accuracy for speed. Introverts tend to have more perseverance (Grant, Gino & Hoffman, 2011) when attempting difficult tasks and outperform extroverts on the Watson-Glaser, appraisal of critical thinking skills. Extroverts, however, tend to do better than introverts when multi-tasking, handling information overload, and working under time and social pressure (Murberg, 2010).

#### **Participating in Group Activities**

Dyadic or small group discussion is more palatable to introverted students if they are given time to consider the topic and are acquainted with group-mates. Introverted students also do better in groups when they have an assigned task, such as taking notes, keeping track of time, etc. (Delany, Johnson, Johnson, & Treslan, 2010; Wood, 2012). Introverted and shy students are typically uncomfortable with being called upon to answer questions. Unfortunately, research on

faculty beliefs about student behaviors suggests that educators tend to correlate not raising one's hand in class, not making eye-contact and not interacting much with others with lower intelligence and decreased learning potential (Rubin & Coplan, 2010).

### **Writing**

Written work is an area in which shy and introverted students can really shine, provided they have sufficient mastery of writing skills. Written assignments allow introverts time to reflect upon, perfect and polish their work before it is submitted. Introverts and shy students appreciate exercises that allow them to share their views anonymously, via classroom electronic clicker systems. Overbaugh and Lin (2007) found that students high in the personality trait openness (as one of the big five personality theory traits), liked using Internet technologies while students low in openness, felt that virtual courses were inferior to the on-campus variety. They also found that in hybrid courses, introverts performed better in the online than on the lab portion. The opposite was true for extroverts.

### **Seeking Rewards**

The term *reward sensitivity* refers to the degree to which an individual is attracted to and excited by activities that will yield a reward (good grade, or formal recognition). Reward sensitivity may be one of the factors that make extroverted students relatively more willing to have attention called to them in the classroom. Unfortunately, once aroused by a possible reward, reward-sensitive people are prone to ignoring warning signs that pursuing the reward might be a bad idea or dangerous. Introverts pursue rewards but are programmed that their vigilance kicks in as soon as they feel themselves getting excited. Introverts' ability to resist rewards is seen as a strength, as they are less likely to pursue risky ventures.

## **Implications for Educators**

Educators who understand the nature of introversion and shyness can make their classroom a safer and more pleasant environment for quiet students without sacrificing the integrity and rigor of their courses. Educators can adjust course requirements, and the manner in which they relate to students, so that students can grow without suffering unduly.

### **Making Decisions about Class Participation**

Almost all the participation-related content in the literature is geared toward helping educators find ways to induce reluctant students to participate. While it is true that extroverted skills are still valued highly in many educational settings, the idea that being both highly participatory and conversationally adroit is of supreme importance to success is being increasingly challenged. Cain (2012) attacks the assumption that extroverting behaviors reap more rewards than introverting behaviors directly, and has amassed evidence supporting the virtues of less participatory, relatively quiet individuals. Schultz (2009), argues that students' silence can be conceptualized differently: silence can indicate a student is thinking about the concepts being presented or that a student from a culture in which silence is valued is behaving in an appropriate manner. Brookfield (2012) found no correlation between students' verbal participation and grades. Faculty must weigh these considerations when making decisions about instructional and evaluative methodology.

Educators who relinquish the Sage on the Stage mentality and embrace student-centered teaching may allocate classroom time to student activities that involve speaking. As public speaking tends to make introverted and shy students uncomfortable, faculty must weigh its potential benefit against potential harm. While it can be argued that students benefit from learning to function outside their comfort zone, faculty should think twice before attempting to

push resistant students into participating in discussion, particularly large group discussions. A more transactional approach is advocated where professors collaboratively make decisions about how much a student will speak up in class. Professors serve reticent students best by exploring their professional goals while helping them weigh the benefits of becoming more participatory against the degree to which doing so would be inimical. Faculty have the option of broadening their definition of class participation to include such shy/introvert-friendly activities as using student response systems (e.g. clickers) in class, discussion forums, identifying additional topic-relevant resources for the class, or preparing written reflections on class activities or content.

### **Implications for Advisors**

Advising students is a big part of the faculty role and one that often causes stress among faculty who strive to be vigilant in their advising practice. Just as half the students are likely to be introverts, half advisees will be also. Shy students are also likely to be well-represented. Advisors can use their understanding of introversion and shyness to educate advisees to assist students who are experiencing academic challenges or dissatisfaction with their major program of study.

#### **Providing Information**

Simply having their introversion and/or shyness acknowledged and accepted as normal by an advisor, and being made aware of potentially useful coping mechanisms and resources, will benefit students enormously. Advisors can provide students with concise informational handouts on introversion and shyness and on the resources their school has to offer. Most schools have a college and career advising office at which students referred by educators or advisors can take the MBTI and have the implications of their results explained to them. School counseling centers may provide support groups for students, and individual counseling as needed.

#### **Assisting Advisees with Social Difficulties**

Advisors who understand introversion and shyness can be on the alert for student accounts of problems that may be Type-related. For example, in the case of an introverted student who reports that his roommates just don't seem to like him, it may be that the roommates are extroverts who are interpreting the student's refusal to accompany them to social events as unfriendliness, and behaving coolly toward him in return. Or, an introvert who complains that her roommates are nagging her to go places might be housed with extroverts who are viewing her home-body ways as problematic and believe that she just needs a social nudge...or two. Extroverts often believe, mistakenly, that their introverted friends would be better off if they got out more. Introverted advisees may benefit from information that will allow them to explain their way of being to associates, and from coaching on how to diplomatically fend off well-meaning extroverts who pressure them to attend unappealing social events.

#### **Assisting Advisees with Difficulties Related to Academics & Major Area of Study**

Although introverts tend to be good students, assuming there are no intervening personal problems or learning disabilities, they may need to be reassured that their desire for lengthy periods of quiet time during which they can study and reflect is not only normal, but advantageous to them academically. Both introverted and shy students may have difficulty approaching faculty, in and out of the classroom, and may fail to seek clarification, assistance, etc., when they need it. Advisors can reiterate the role of educators, and perhaps provide students with a short teacher-approaching script they can memorize and vary according to the circumstance.

Shy students experiencing academic difficulty should be questioned about the amount of time (unrelated to coursework) they spend online. Internet addiction is more prevalent among shy students, who tend to be more comfortable relating online than face-to-face and are known to spend more time online than students who are not shy.

### **Assisting Advisees Dissatisfied with their Major Program of Study**

It is not uncommon for students to enroll in a selected major, only to realize it does not suit them. Such realizations should be viewed by advisers as important and commendable discoveries. Little (2011) cautions that it is challenging for introverts to discover their passion because they may well have spent so much of their lives conforming to extroverted norms and ignoring their authentic preferences. In summary, faculty advisors can assist students who are having social or academic difficulties related to their introversion or shyness by accepting their way of being as normal, providing them with relevant information and directing them to other resources as indicated.

### **Conclusion**

Introversion and shyness are distinct, biologically and environmentally-based personality characteristics that, along with some forms of cultural socialization, can give rise to markedly quiet and reticent behavior in students - behavior that is not widely understood or endorsed in American culture. Students may suffer when behaviors arising from introversion and shyness are misinterpreted by peers and faculty, causing social and academic difficulties. Given that there are nearly equal numbers of introverted and extroverted students in most classes, and that learning outcomes are better when students have the opportunity to process new information in their preferred way (McLeod, 2010), nurse-faculty may wish to provide a balance of introvert-friendly and extrovert-friendly classroom activities and assignments. While there is evidence that some quiet students can improve their ability to speak publicly with practice and support, there is also evidence that for others, speaking up is simply too difficult and painful. Interviewing students who are not speaking in class and allowing them, where indicated, to choose alternate ways of meeting course requirements is an option that allows professors to demonstrate both respect and compassion for their students. Gaps in the Nursing Education and the Adult Education literature still exist. More research is needed about how to best maintain a culture of civility and safety in the classroom while meeting the learning needs of a diverse student body.

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