

Enhancing Engagement: Can Asynchronous Distance Learning Classrooms Empower the Introverted Student in Higher Education and Beyond?

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Abstract: Despite a reputation for quiet studiousness, introverts may find the face-to-face classroom a particularly unwelcoming and chaotic environment for learning. An asynchronous distance learning environment provides a unique opportunity to enhance the achievement of introverted students by promoting in-depth consideration of learning objectives without disruption. Success in a distance learning classroom may offer more positive associations and build confidence regarding the educational process. While more research needs to be done to explore whether introverted students have higher completion rates and scores using distance learning than in a traditional classroom experience, it does appear to be a promising development for those students who prefer a lower stimuli environment where their contributions can be as significant as those of their extroverted, socially motivated peers. Though introverts typically score well in academic environments and can thrive in leadership positions, they may feel disengaged or viewed negatively in face-to-face classroom environments. Providing greater engagement strategies in an online environment may ensure that these students' academic and professional contributions are not overlooked.

Distance learning was once considered a niche approach to college, but since the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education now includes many options to pursue coursework through distance learning platforms. As distance learning opportunities in higher education continue to grow and evolve, introverted students may be able to maximize their success in these online education environments. Distance learning classrooms—particularly those that offer asynchronous elements—could help introverts feel more at ease and better able to avoid the common pitfalls experienced in face-to-face courses. Introverts are generally identified as individuals who prefer quiet, low stimulation environments with fewer social requirements and plenty of time for consideration before decision making. Asynchronous distance learning courses may provide a more welcoming environment and a foundation of success for this population of students who often experience alienation or feel overwhelmed in a traditional higher education classroom.

A Growing Understanding of Introversion

In popular literature, academic inquiry, and social media chatter, there is a growing awareness of personality and learning preferences. This understanding broadly categorizes individuals as having either primarily introverted or extroverted tendencies and preferences. In general, introverts are identified as individuals who may exhibit “a preference for lower-stimulation environments” (Mascone, 2016, para. 1). Introverts are typically considered “highly sensitive in social settings...and thus, are more involved in solitary activities or situations that require very limited social interactions” (Farooqi, 2021, p. 112). Estimated to be one third to one half of people, introverted traits typically involve a significant need for independence and a facility with written communication (Kuofie et al., 2015). Introverts may also require more silence and time to do their best work because they “draw their energy from quiet reflection and solitude” (Mascone, 2016, para. 1). Introverted individuals may regularly avoid social situations that require them to be in the spotlight (Akhavan et al., 2016). While extroverts might feel vibrant and engaged when surrounded by people and conversation, an introvert is more likely to feel overwhelmed at a faster rate (Pal & Bhardwaj, 2016).

Though introversion and extroversion have been discussed for decades, many people are familiar with these terms and implications primarily through the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator scale, drawing on Carl Jung’s theory of personality, which offers cognitive insights for those outside the mental health professions (Nadel, 2008). The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator scale “classifies personality traits into four dichotomies: extroverted-introverted, sensing-intuitive, thinking-feeling, and judgement-perception” (Al-Dujaily et al., 2013, p. 17). This scale can help introduce people to their tendency toward introversion or extroversion. In clinical settings, over-reliance on this popularly used scale is not advised as it, “may exaggerate the tendency of individuals to make dispositional attributions while ignoring situational conditions that affect behavior” (Pittenger, 2005, para. 38). While its accuracy may be debated, the scale can highlight awareness of different individual needs and responses to environments. Understanding the broad range of personality types and inclinations may help lead to improvements in the workplace or at school to suit a wider range of learning preferences. When seeking to make classrooms “more accessible to different learners, introverts may not be top of mind for faculty” (Callahan, 2021, p. 717). Coursework and learning strategies that are tailored to the strengths of introverts may provide an additional pathway to success for these quiet individuals.

The Classroom and Introverted Students

The face-to-face classroom can be an unwelcoming place for introverts. Students in a face-to-face classroom may be called on to give immediate responses and to think quickly while the instructor and classmates are waiting. Introverted students may prefer additional time to consider ideas before participating and answering questions (Iasevoli, 2018). An in-person class can feel like it is filled with chaos and disruptions which are difficult for someone who is introverted (Nadel, 2008). While introverts can cope with these chaotic environments, they experience more stress in highly stimulating situations (Pal & Bhardwaj, 2016). Kaefer et al. (2014, para.5) note, “Differences in personality can possibly lead individuals to present different reactions to the same stimulus or situation.” The experience of stress and exclusion may have longer term negative impacts on introverts. In the classroom, as in many social situations, the skills of the extrovert are typically rewarded while the introverts may develop a feeling of devaluation (Pal & Bhardwaj, 2016). The additional time offered students in an asynchronous learning environment may lead to better or more in-depth insights into the learning objectives. Lowenthal et al. (2020) find that “asynchronous learning environments enables learners to take their time reading, and if necessary, rereading, their course content” (p. 15). Nevertheless, in their work, McCarty and Wertheim (2022) found,

“Contrary to the expectation expressed frequently by faculty, students, and industry, learning outcomes for both in-class and remote classes were similar” (p.111). With continuing advances in the higher education distance learning space, concerns about the inherent quality of a distance learning classroom experience are becoming better understood.

Though introverts and extroverts do not have measurable differences in outcomes from group work, introverts rate the experience poorly (Persky et al., 2015). Many face-to-face classrooms incorporate team-based styles of learning which can be negative experiences for introverts (Walker, 2007). Unless the class is particularly welcoming to an introvert’s style of consideration and contributions, they may be viewed as poor team players (Nadel, 2008). Beeman (2022) notes that, “The virtual classroom has the potential to address some of the challenges that contribute to low participation rates among quiet students in new ways” (p.4). Taking learning and interactions out of a tumultuous in-person environment and into a potentially neutral, web-based classroom can provide a fresh opportunity to interact on more favorable terms with classmates and the instructor. Including asynchronous elements in the distance learning classroom, like making recorded videos available, can ensure that students are able to participate on their own terms and in their own time (Callahan, 2021). Rios et al. (2018) note that, “Student satisfaction with what they learn and how they learn in an online classroom is an important variable to understand, as it can help instructors and course designers create an environment that fits students’ needs” (p.7). Feeling satisfied in a learning environment could potentially enhance student persistence and the confidence necessary to succeed with both academic and longer term professional goals.

Innovative course design can ensure that all students are able to access and process the content in a way that works for their own learning needs. Including options such as asynchronous discussion areas can “provide students time for reflection to encourage more deliberate responses” (Callahan, 2021, p. 719). Research exploring social media and well-being suggests that introverts may specifically benefit from the perception of online support (Hu et al., 2017). While the face-to-face classroom may be geared toward the interpersonal success of extroverts, “the virtual world often provides an opportunity of expression and growth [where]. . .introverts are able to make valuable connections with others” (Kuofie et al., 2015, para. 31). Al-Dujaily et al. (2013) find that matching digital learning and student personality is a key component of success when designing e-learning systems. A study of classrooms that use blended learning techniques, incorporating in-person and online components, saw a beneficial impact on student motivation and success, while also noting “that introvert students need online learning tools more than others” (Yagci, 2016). Borup et al. (2013) found that introverts appreciated the flexibility of an asynchronous learning environment and felt more at ease communicating with others in a digital classroom. Features such as private chat can enable introverted students to seek out assistance from the instructor without feeling like they are disrupting the entire class (Binu, 2022). Blau and Barak (2012) found that “introverts expressed greater readiness for holding discussions via text chat” (p.12). Offering multiple avenues for communication in a classroom may help ensure that instructors are meeting students where they are and can open valuable opportunities for connection and learning.

Introversion and Success Beyond the Classroom

Introverts must live, learn, and work in environments that seem geared toward maximizing the success of extroverted individuals (Kuofie et al., 2015). McClure (2020) posits that extroverts “are more highly valued and rewarded since teamwork and collaboration are promoted and encouraged” (p.32). Success may appear predicated on the ability to conform to extroverted ideas of social engagement. However, introverts can be effective leaders in the workplace because they, “consider information before they make decisions and act or speak” (Kuofie et al., 2015, para. 8). This could be a particularly beneficial trait in a

globalized world where multiple viewpoints and possible repercussions need to be considered before significant decisions are implemented. The COVID-19 pandemic has also increased the prevalence and normalcy of remote work from home employment (Ng et al., 2022). This could be potentially advantageous for individuals who are comfortable working independently. Those with introverted traits may be well-suited for other demanding positions since “the hallmarks of introversion—thoughtfulness, an analytical mind, and adept listening skills among others—can equip students with a strong basis for a clinical career” (Gillett, 2016, para 19). Susan Cain (2015) finds that when introverts choose to become leaders in a professional environment, they demonstrate a “true, authentic commitment” which resonates deeply with others. Farrell (2017) notes that introverts may be overlooked for leadership positions but organizations “should be open to considering the strengths of introverts and their ability to be effective leaders through their analytical and thoughtful styles” (p.438).

Maximizing the success, confidence, and engagement of introverts throughout the educational process and into the workplace may help bring benefits to many professional fields in the new age of remote work. Introverted individuals may feel more comfortable communicating with others in written form rather than in face-to-face encounters (Kuofie et al., 2015). This can be of a particular benefit in the digital age where so much communication is done via email, instant message, team collaboration platforms, or text message. Online environments can offer more control and ease for introverts (Charinsarn & Wattanasuwan, 2011). While extroverts might easily chat with strangers or express themselves effusively in person, introverts may avoid being the center of attention and eschew excessive verbal communication. Introverts prefer solitary mental activities that require more concentration (Akhavan et al., 2016). Digital environments that allow time for consideration and thoughtfulness may be better able to offer opportunities for connection, learning, and growth. Reaching out and engaging others may be more easily accomplished by introverts through digital forums like social media (Booth, 2017). Introverts may also display more extroverted traits in an online setting (Charinsarn & Wattanasuwan, 2011). More research is needed to understand the impact of remote work environments on diverse learning and personality types. Better understanding potential limitations can help drive future design of digital work and education environments.

Success in the higher education classroom may help empower introverted students to tackle the challenges of the professional world. Though introverts may be uncomfortable, they can still develop the skills to succeed in academics and the workplace. University students who have introverted traits typically have higher grade point averages than students with extroverted traits (Baran & Kilic, 2015). While these studies of university students may focus on a particularly successful population, there should be more research regarding students who have left traditional schooling due to the interpersonal challenges of the traditional classroom.

Conclusion

Although introverts may find the face-to-face classroom a challenging environment for learning, online education coursework could provide a unique opportunity to enhance the confidence and achievement of introverted students and promote in-depth consideration of learning objectives without disruption. In either a fully asynchronous distance learning classroom or a distance learning classroom with asynchronous elements such as discussion boards and private chat options, introverted students may feel more welcome and engaged with the material and goals of the course. Success in a distance learning classroom may provide more positive associations and confidence regarding the educational process and could help better prepare introverted individuals for the workplace. While more research needs to be done to explore whether introverted students have higher completion rates and scores

using distance learning than a traditional classroom experience, it does appear to be a promising development for certain populations of students who may prefer a lower stimuli environment where their contributions can be as significant as those of their extroverted peers. Exhibiting preferences for written communications and tendencies toward careful deliberation can help introverts succeed as leaders in many professional fields. Providing intentionally designed educational opportunities for introverted students may ensure that their academic and professional contributions are not overlooked.

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