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Introverts and Cooperative Learning

The extroversion – introversion continuum is well known, not only among psychologists, but also among the public in general. Recently, Susan Cain (2012; 2016), in two best-selling books and a Ted Talk (Cain, 2013) with over 16 million views as of March 2017, has argued that introverts are underappreciated. The purpose of this brief report is to use the cooperative learning literature to address what Cain says about introverts in groups in education settings.

First, a bit of background may be useful. Introversion and extroversion are variables along a continuum with no student (or teacher, for that matter) completely introvert or extrovert, and some people, known as ambiverts, in the middle. Generally introverts, among whom I count myself, prefer to:

1. sometimes have time alone
2. not be at the centre of attention
3. be in groups of two or three rather than large groups
4. engage in deep conversations instead of chit chat
5. have opportunities to think before speaking
6. ask questions instead of answering them
7. write sometimes rather than speak.

Cain estimates that about one third of the population are introverts.

Cain's second book is titled, *Quiet power: Growing up as an introvert in a world that can't stop talking*, and is written especially to share advice from young introverts. This book shows greater appreciation of group activities compared to her first book, which contains a chapter, "When collaboration kills creativity". In the first book, Cain (cited in Jacobs, 2014) argues that learning, productivity, and creativity tend to decline when people work in groups rather than alone. She gives the example of a task in which graduate students were to develop a list of equipment needed in a survival situation. One of the groups did poorly despite the fact that one of the group's members had substantial experience in the specific survival context. What went wrong? That person was an introvert, and the extroverts in the group did not let him speak.

Fortunately Cain does recognise that, when properly carried out, group activities can be beneficial for all; for example please note the word 'When' in the chapter title from the previous paragraph, "When collaboration kills creativity". Cain gives some advice for introvert students learning in groups. Not all of her advice is in sync with the cooperative learning literature.

1. Group activities do not mean that students are always together in the same space and always interacting. There can also be time to spend apart from groupmates working towards the group's goals, and, even when the group meets together, to work alone.

2. Cain urges that introverts identify the group roles with which they are most comfortable and then take on those roles, usually the non-speaking roles. I tend to disagree, because schools are not like companies; in schools, the goal is for students to try on new roles. Furthermore, Cain notes that when introverts need to, they can step into the limelight, speaking and otherwise performing.
3. Cain also advocates that students be allowed to choose their own partners. Yes, with this method of group selection, students usually feel more comfortable with groupmates. However, “birds of a feather flock together”, which means that student selected groups tend to be homogeneous on variables such as sex, ethnicity, socio-economic status and past achievement. This runs counter to the cooperative learning principle of heterogeneous grouping, which promotes the view that groups that are heterogeneous as to membership aid learning and overall social cohesion.
4. Another cooperative learning principle is the teaching of cooperative skills. Cain urges the development of such skills, such as how students can stop themselves from being interrupted by raising their voice slightly and holding up an open hand with the palm facing outward. Additionally, extroverts can learn such cooperative skills as encouraging others to participate and listening politely.

In conclusion, appreciating diversity represents an important concept in education. Diversity takes many forms, including personality variables, such as extroversion-introversion. Introvert students do not need to be ‘cured’ by being changed into extroverts. Instead, teachers and students, including the introvert students themselves, need to appreciate the strengths of introverts, such as being careful listeners, detailed observers and reflective thinkers. In this way, cooperative learning can be a growth experience for all students, as well as their teachers.

References

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