



# Speaking up for the introverts

Shyness and a dislike of public performance are traits that students are often encouraged to ‘overcome’. We should support everyone to learn in ways that make them feel comfortable, says **Bruce Macfarlane**

**W**hen I was an undergraduate in the early 1980s I said very little in class. I was shy and diffident and felt much more comfortable expressing myself in writing than by speaking. More than 30 years later I am much the same, even though I have learned how to at least appear confident as a university professor. I guess that is part of the role I have to play.

But this is hardly a unique personal revelation. Many teachers are what Susan Cain, in her best-selling book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* (2012), calls “pretend extroverts”, who have learned to cover up their shyness in the classroom. More widely, it is estimated that anything between a third and a half of

people are introverts. This must logically apply to the students we teach at university.

However, university students are no longer allowed to be shy. “Active learning” has become a modern mantra. Students must ask questions, express opinions, lead oral presentations and participate enthusiastically in community projects. To collaborate is sacrosanct. Passivity, on the other hand, is considered the enemy of learning. They must be vocal, expressive and assertive. The extrovert ideal, as Cain calls it, is all the rage.

There is simply no place any more for the introvert. Shyness has, according to Susie Scott, reader in sociology at the University of Sussex, been medicalised as an antisocial condition in modern society. Being shy is also out of step



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with what it means to be a good university student. Time and effort must be tracked by monitoring students' attendance, class contribution and community engagement. The key is that students must be seen to be learning. Such engagement is said to lead to better degree results and improved career chances.

Student talk is equated with evidence of learning. This, allied to the pragmatic reality of assessing large numbers of students in an era of mass higher education, is why class contribution grading has been on the rise. It used to be that this was mainly a North American phenomenon, yet this practice is now common in the UK and found all around the world as the assumptions of the student engagement movement spread far and wide.

I recently sat in on a master's degree class at one of China's leading universities. At first I was impressed by the eagerness of students to raise their hands, make comments and ask questions, until I realised that a teaching assistant was noting down how often each one contributed using a tick list. I later learned that this was the mechanical means by which individual class contribution grades were being generated.

Asking questions or speaking in class have become performative expectations. Like all forms of performativity, applicable to academics and students alike, only things that are observable count. Only what is visible is audited. This is why there is no place in the new regime of student engagement for shy



students who might participate in less obvious ways through active listening, making eye contact, taking good notes and even, dare I say, thinking.

Such subtlety is not understood in the brave new performative world of university learning. Worse still, shy students are stigmatised as "social loafers" or online "lurkers". This judgemental labelling applies to individuals

who read and observe but do not make oral or written contributions in class or on discussion forums. Loafers and lurkers are branded as selfish, borderline sociopaths who take without giving to the learning community.

As teachers we are quick to think of silence in class as a problem. We assume that unless students are talking they are not learning. Silence also offends our sense of

### 'STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL SHYNESS OFTEN WANT CONFIRMATION THAT THEIR IDEAS ARE RIGHT'

**Madelaine Morrison gives shy students an opportunity to practise intellectual conversation in a non-threatening environment**

For the shy student, small-group discussions constitute a fearsome weekly ritual. Undergraduates sit like ducks in a stuffy classroom, forced to converse with peers they barely know under the watchful gaze of the beady-eyed tutorial leader. No matter what claptrap the tutorial facilitator has given them about "safe, positive learning spaces", they know very well that the best method of survival

is to keep their mouths resolutely shut.

I have informally observed two types of shyness, sometimes (though not always) co-existing within the same person. The intellectually shy student may thrive in regular social situations, yet freezes up in academic settings. He or she is mainly afraid of voicing an opinion that is not "clever enough". The socially shy student is afraid not so much of the ideas themselves but rather their delivery. He or she dreads the red-hot sensation of others' glances while trying to articulate a coherent response.

In Canada, universities

have been steadily increasing their focus on small-group participation. In arts and humanities courses, classroom discussions can account for anywhere from 10 to 35 per cent of a student's final grade. Fourth-year history courses are often billed as seminars, where participation can be worth a whopping 40 per cent. In our educational system, silent students pay a heavy academic price indeed.

My approach to student shyness aims for empathy while also recognising that oral communication skills are critical for success in the workplace. On the first day of class, I ask shy students to iden-

tify themselves to me via email, so that we can work out a system of accommodation. To discourage freeloaders, I stress that this will not result in a "free ride" as regards seminar attendance or participation.

When a student follows up on my request, I invite them to email me a one or two paragraph reflection piece before each seminar, to contribute to (but not entirely replace) their oral participation mark. I then encourage them to visit during office hours. That way, they can "test run" some ideas with me. Students with intellectual shyness often want confirmation that their ideas

are "right" even though they invariably present thoughtful critiques. Talking through ideas one-on-one gives them an opportunity to practise intellectual conversation in a non-threatening atmosphere.

I even recommend that these students write out their thoughts on the assigned readings before coming to class. This gives them the opportunity to choose their words calmly and precisely. Upon arrival at the seminar, they will find that they have a "script" to remind them of exactly what they wished to say.

Finally, I ask shy students to challenge themselves to speak up at

least once per class. As a socially shy undergraduate, I remember telling myself that my nervousness would wear off once I got used to talking. I was pleased to discover that it certainly did.

In short, our response to student shyness must balance respect for the individual's needs with the realisation that we owe it to them to help them face their fears. If we can nurture such change in even one student, then our work as instructors has truly been worthwhile.

**Madelaine Morrison recently completed her PhD in history at Carleton University in Canada.**

self-importance and self-worth. Why, we resentfully ask ourselves, are they not interested in what we have to say or in ideas we hold dear? As a result we tend to blame quiet students for being surly or ill-prepared. Yet according to Mary Reda in her book, *Between Speaking and Silence: A Study of Quiet Students* (2009), listening and reflective introspection need to be understood as legitimate forms of class participation. Silence is just as likely as talking to indicate an engagement with the ideas of others.

The virtues of being shy are, in fact, well suited to many of the central values of higher education. These include not being overconfident about making knowledge claims and thinking ideas through before speaking. Yet shy students are seen as in need of therapeutic treatment. There is plenty of advice on helping them to become more self-confident and vocal. Universities run courses for students who want to develop their speaking skills and there are also special reticence courses for shy students at universities such as Pennsylvania State in the US.

Many of these courses are aimed at encouraging students to become more self-assured speakers now that group-based oral presentations have become so widely used as an assessment tool. However, while the performative drama of the oral presentation allows the self-confident to shine, the shy are often left eyes to the floor, shuffling their feet at the back of the group. Grading tends to focus on oral loquacity during the PowerPoint-led oral presentation, especially since this is the visible, albeit transitory, product. This allows the extrovert to make a positive impression regardless of how little they may have contributed along the way. The many hours of background research and preparation to which the shy may have contributed more substantially is rarely assessed.

Students, we are told, must learn in groups because this reflects the realities of the workplace. The evidence, though, suggests that students often find peer learning to be a poor use of their time. Research indicates that they resent listening to dominating classmates during group work. Moreover, contrary to the urban myth, peer group learning does not reflect the reality of the workplace because work environments are based largely on groups composed of individuals of different ranks, a built-in means of controlling free-riders.

Nor can modern-day students afford to be modest. They must now convey self-confidence and passion by wanting to shape and shake the world as potential future leaders and active global citizens. I recall spending many Saturday mornings during my youth helping to recycle newspapers by collecting them on my bicycle as a boy scout. Nowadays such activities would be trumpeted as evidence of global citizenship and a commitment to sustainability. It would never have occurred to me for a moment to make capital out of such actions – frankly, it would have made me feel embarrassed. Self-confident students do not care more than shy ones, they are simply better at bragging about it in building the evidence required for grades or aggrandising their CVs.

### 'HAVING TO GIVE PRESENTATIONS WAS DIFFICULT AND INCREDIBLY NERVE-RACKING'

**Rebecca Unsworth found that a supportive atmosphere and a detailed knowledge of her subject helped to make her more confident and articulate**

I have always struggled with shyness. My school reports all said I was hard-working but needed to speak up more in class, and the situation did not change much when I went to university to study history. I was happy attending lectures or quietly getting on with my own reading or essay writing, but shyness made it difficult for me to talk in sem-

inars and make friends in the brash environment of a big university campus.

During my MA, taught predominantly through seminars, not being able to verbally express myself in a small group became more of an issue. I was frustrated by my inability to contribute to class discussions; when a question was raised either my mind went completely blank or by the time I had worked up the courage to say something, the conversation had moved on. Having to give presentations on my research was difficult and incredibly nerve-racking, while in

tutorials I rarely felt that I had adequately conveyed my research or said or asked what I needed to.

What helped during my MA was being on a small, close-knit course with a supportive and encouraging atmosphere, where you knew that your fellow students and tutors wanted to help you. And I have found that the more I know about my subject, the more confident and articulate I am, so that I actually surprised myself with my relative eloquence in my MA viva and PhD interview.

Starting a PhD, it is daunting to know that as

an academic you are potentially expected to network, speak at conferences, chair panels and even teach. But I do not think that academia necessarily requires you to be any more "vocal" or is any less suitable for shy people than any other job, or, indeed, life in general.

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Many of the pressures that discriminate against shy students are based on Western assumptions about the dialogic nature of knowledge construction. The growth and internationalisation of Western higher education models in Asia has led to these assumptions being applied to students from Confucian-heritage and other Asian cultures, with little attention paid to social values in these contexts. There is also a widespread misconception that a shy disposition is something unique to Chinese and other Asian students. Correspondingly, Western students are stereotyped as confident talkaholics. The more complex reality is that many students in Western universities are just as likely to be introverts, with a preference for quiet introspection.

As well as group work, students are increas-

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ingly assessed on the basis of reflective practice assignments that demand an opening up of the private and the personal. These are intended to produce an authentic insight into how trainee teachers, social workers or nurses, say, have developed their thinking and practice on the basis of experience. They are also deployed as a way for students to consider their own attitudes to social issues more generally.

Reflective assignments require a confessional performance. This is something that many students, and especially the shy, find difficult because there is a built-in expectation that such reflections will be "deep" and therefore self-revealing. Students need to show how they have changed as a person as a result of educational or working experiences. They are mainly about demonstrating attitudes rather than knowledge.

Reflective assignments pose great challenges

for the shy or reticent. The more creative seek to protect their privacy by concocting a reflection that, while appearing revelatory, is little more than an exercise in creative writing. Some do this by inventing stories of personal transformations or "journeys". It is hardly surprising that the Facebook generation, brought up on a diet of reality TV, have learned how to mask their real selves in order to protect their privacy.

"Respecting diversity" is a rhetorical boast in the higher education sector but, in reality, there is a collective failure to respect the fact that not all students have the same personality traits. Many of us recall the iconic BT advertisement in which we were told "It's good to talk". In university classrooms talk is no longer just good, it is compulsory.

Those that promote this agenda refer, almost reverentially, to their commitment to "student-centred" learning, a term originally coined by the psychotherapist Carl Rogers in his 1951 book, *Client-centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory*.

However, Rogers' own students commented on how they could talk or be silent and were free from the pressure to participate or espouse particular opinions. In short, they were free to learn. I believe that there is a need to reclaim the original meaning of "student-centred" and that we should respect a student's right to privacy, to reticence and even to silence.

Success in life depends on many things and a dose of self-assurance is undoubtedly one of them. There is nothing wrong with helping to build student confidence, but learning at university should be valued as an opportunity for individuals to engage with knowledge in different ways, rather than a public performance. We need to press the pause button and give our students some space to breathe. ●

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