# Does Cooperative Learning Disrespect Introverts?

I just listened to Susan Caine on the positives of introversion. To listen to her, Go to:

Ted.com and search for Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking.

I am writing this in part because trainers are likely to have someone ask, Isn't Susan right? Aren't we overemphasizing cooperative learning at the expense of individual creativity and respect for introverts? Isn't cooperative learning just group-think, following the group at the expense of following one's own thinking/values?

To answer this we generally say we don't call for cooperative learning all the time, it should be part of the diet, not all of it. But there is more in what Susan claims that we need to be able to respond to.

Susan is a powerful speaker and much of what she says is true. I like the distinction between shyness (fear of social disapproval) and introversion (preference for alone time over social interaction).

Susan thinks we are doing too much group work and that, contrary to prior times, teachers now see the introvert as a problem or as in need of help. She calls to respect the introvert because, often, alone time is the place from which creativity springs.

She points out that in groups we follow the most verbal, extroverted person, but following that idea has no correlation with being right or best.

What I think she does not realize is that some forms of cooperative learning (ours) attempt to balance alone time with group interaction. For example, in Numbered Heads Together each student is to come up with their best answer on their own, write it down, and then put their heads together to compare and improve their answers. This is exactly what Susan is calling for, but she lumps all cooperative learning as just working in groups.

To take another example, we do Think – Write – RoundRobin. The first two steps of this are perfect for the introvert; the third step for the extrovert.

To take yet another example, we call for Think Time before students are called upon to respond.

Perhaps Susan would feel different about cooperative learning if she saw how we do it and how often we carve out space for the introvert to get her/his ideas together without interaction.

Susan makes the claim that 25% - 50% of people are introverts and prefer to work alone. Not sure where she gets those numbers. It is the case that introversion-extroversion is to an extent biological. Jerome Kagan at Harvard studied infants and found some were born introverts and others born extroverts. This however, does not mean that someone who is a born introvert cannot learn to enjoy and benefit from social interaction — to actually seek it rather than retreat from it. In the same way, someone who is a born extrovert can learn to seek and treasure alone time.

When the Johnsons administered their preference measures, they found 80 to 90% of kids preferred working in groups. We informally poll our students and get the same ratio. We also get many examples of students who initially resist working with others, but who come to enjoy it and prefer it. If it were going against their grain, the numbers would not come out that way.

We also have many teachers reporting that students who were painfully shy come out and enjoy working with others because of the supportive teambuilding and classbuilding we do.

BUT I THINK SUSAN MISSES THE MOST IMPORTANT POINT:  In her world you are an introvert, extrovert, or somewhere in the middle. In my world, I am an introvert at times, an extrovert at times, and sometimes somewhere in the middle.

I believe part of the mission of education should be to develop adaptive introversion-extroversion.  That is, the ability to be introverted when that is adaptive (write a poem, contemplate one's place in the universe, meditate, have an internal dialog, decide a course of action for oneself, solve some kinds of problems....) and extroverted when adaptive (lead a group, share an experience, enjoy the company of others, reach out and uplift someone who is fallen, let go of one's ego and merge with another or a group, solve other types of problems....).