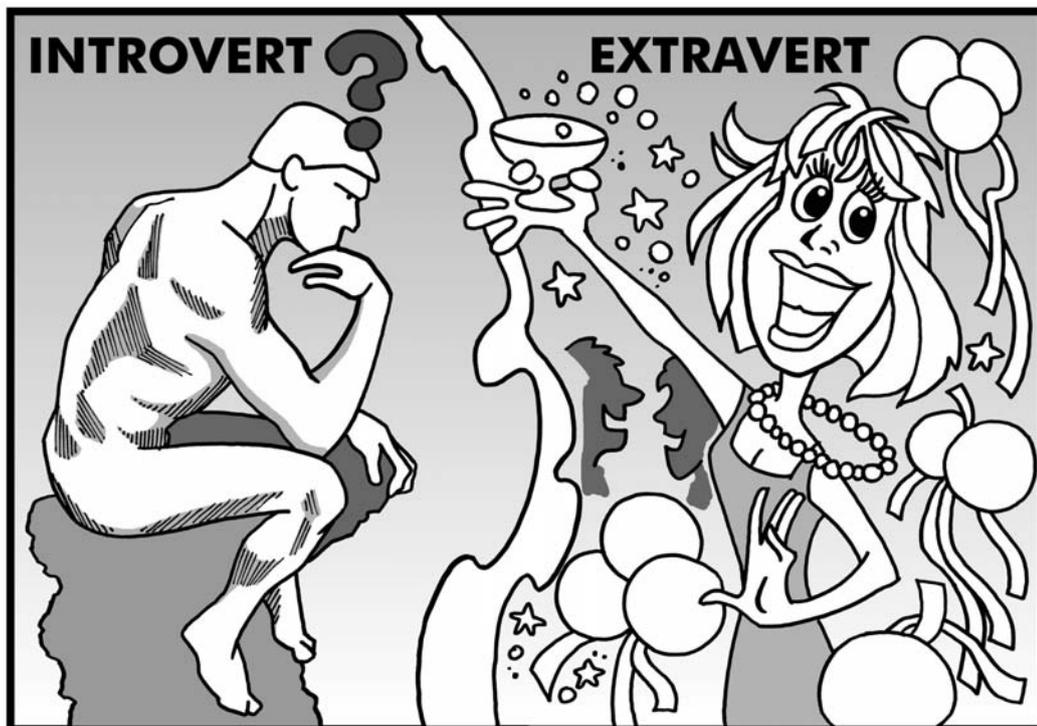


Part 2

Introverts and extraverts

Like most simplistic classifications, the designation of people as **either** introverts or extraverts arises from, and results in, a lot of stereotyped thinking. Introverts are often portrayed as socially withdrawn and socially inept. Extraverts are often portrayed as party animals.



The key to the difference, however, is not so much the individual's behaviour as the source of their energy. Introverts gain energy from within themselves; they tend to be reflective people who are 'oriented towards the subjective world of thoughts and concepts' (Silverman, 1998, p. 39). Extraverts are more directed towards the world outside themselves and gain energy from other people or events. Introverts constitute a minority group in western societies, comprising approximately 25% of the population. Interestingly, however, studies of gifted adolescents and adults have found a much higher proportion of introverts. Shelagh Gallagher (1990) studied more than 1,700 adolescents in programs for the gifted and found that 50% were introverted. Very highly gifted students are even more likely to be introverted; Linda Silverman, in her studies of young people of IQ 160+, found that more than 75% were introverts (Silverman, 1993).

Studies of the personality characteristics of introverts and extraverts, and, in particular, how they 'show themselves' to the world, have found that, in general, extraverts have more of a 'single-layered' personality. What you see is pretty much what you get. By contrast, introverts are more likely to have a 'private self' which they see as the 'real me' and a 'public self' — the **persona** — which they use for 'everyday wear'.

Some introverts can 'act' good extraverts! Many gifted teachers have this talent. Indeed many 'closet introverts' who have a high public profile as actors, popular musicians, or politicians and who are required to 'perform' frequently in their public role, develop a carefully cultivated extravert persona for public consumption, showing their introvert side only to family or close acquaintances.

Obviously, the majority of people have elements of both introversion and extraversion in their personalities. The question is not 'which' one is, but which 'side' dominates. The following list, adapted from Silverman (1993), describes essential differences between introverts and extraverts — but remember that this is not so much an issue of dichotomy as a matter of degree.

Extraverts **tend** to:

- get energy from interaction with people or events
- have a single-layered personality; they are much the same in public and in private
- be open and trusting
- think out loud
- like to be the centre of attention
- learn by doing
- be comfortable quickly in new situations
- make friends easily and have a lot of friends
- be easily distractable
- be impulsive
- be risk takers in groups.

Introverts **tend** to:

- get energy from inside themselves
- feel drained by people
- have an 'inner self' and an 'outer self' (multilayered)
- need privacy
- mentally rehearse what they are going to say before they start speaking
- dislike being the centre of attention
- learn by observing rather than doing
- be uncomfortable with changes
- have a few very close friends rather than a wide circle of more casual friends
- be capable of intense concentration
- be reflective
- dislike being in large groups
- be quiet in groups for fear of embarrassment or humiliation.

Schools are highly 'social' organisations. Children are encouraged to be gregarious and to form wide-ranging friendship groups. Children who prefer the companionship of one or two close friends, as gifted children often do, are often encouraged to socialise more widely. Students who don't often respond in class because the pace of discussion is too fast and they don't have time to formulate their thoughts into words before the topic has changed, are urged to 'contribute a bit more'. We pay lipservice to reflective thought but we don't encourage it. 'Wait time' — the length of time a teacher waits in class for a question to be answered — is seldom more than two or three seconds.

The following section is adapted from the work of Silverman (1993, 1998) and Roedell (1988), and provides useful advice for teachers and parents of gifted introverts.

Responding to the needs of introverts

Give 'wait time'

Introverts need rather more time to think before responding to a question or statement than do extraverted age-peers. Gifted introverts may be able to think of many more responses and they need time to select the response that says most clearly what is in their minds. A useful and practical teaching technique is to give 'wait time'.

The teacher asks the gifted or reflective student a question and then gives her structured time to respond. 'Jacquie, how did the author build up suspense in the story? I'll come back to you in a few minutes'. Then the teacher moves on with the lesson or asks simpler (lower level in Bloom's hierarchy) questions to two or three other students before glancing back to Jacquie. If Jacquie is ready to respond she can nod to the teacher to indicate this; if she needs a little more time she can smile a 'not yet'. When she does respond, her answer will be much richer and more detailed. She will be happier with her response — and so, probably, will her classmates and teacher. Note that the teacher's question required an analytical and evaluative response. Students should not be expected to 'snap' back answers to questions at the higher levels of Bloom, and introspective gifted students are especially unlikely to be able to do so.

Don't interrupt them

Gifted students have an enhanced capacity to see the 'interconnectedness' of things and they may want to explain these interrelationships in their answers to questions. It can be extremely frustrating and deeply humiliating for a bright introverted student when a teacher or classmate interrupts before he has reached the end of the explanation. Sometimes it completely destroys the student's train of thought. Besides, it's rude. We teach students not to interrupt; we should obey the same conventions of courtesy ourselves. If we want to explain to the student that it's counter-productive to be so long-winded, it is better to do this in private, after the lesson. We could assist the student to practise making her answers more concise.

Don't embarrass introverts in public

Of course, we shouldn't do this with any student but introverts are liable to be much more humiliated. Remember that gifted students are not only likely to be introverts, they are also likely to be more emotionally responsive (remember the section on overexcitabilities in Core Module 3?).

Reprimand them privately rather than publicly

This is a natural lead-on from the last paragraph and for the same reasons! However, if, as a teacher, you feel the reprimand must be public, address the behaviour, not the individual. 'Chad, that was pretty thoughtless behaviour. Somebody could have been hurt,' rather than, 'Don't be so thoughtless, Chad, you could have hurt somebody.'

Let them observe in new situations

As indicated above, whereas extraverts learn by doing, introverts tend to learn by observing. Most people make mistakes in their early stages of learning a new field or process but introverts tend to value privacy and they like to be allowed to make mistakes in private. We should also remember that gifted students are less accustomed to making mistakes and they are also more likely to be mocked by classmates when they do so. They are usually poignantly aware of this and it may increase their nervousness. Let them watch first, when they are learning something new, before attempting it. 'Discovery learning' is not the preferred process for introverts!

Develop an 'early warning system'

Gifted introverts are more likely than extraverted ability peers to enter a 'flow' state when they are working on something they love and are good at. Some can become quite distressed if they are suddenly told to stop what they are doing immediately and move on to something else. Give them a 15-minute warning to finish whatever they are doing — or to get to a stage where they can leave it — before moving on to the next activity or before calling them to dinner.

Don't push them to make lots of friends

You are unlikely to make a gregarious student out of an introvert but you **are** likely to make the introvert feel pretty uncomfortable if you insist. The introvert is well aware that society is comprised largely of extraverts and that he or she is a member of a minority group. Assist the introverted child to find one or two children who have similar interests or abilities and encourage the development of this friendship. By the middle years of primary school gifted introverts may already have experienced rejection for being 'doubly different' and they may need encouragement and practical advice if they are to develop the confidence to approach other students as possible friends.

Respect their introversion; don't try to make them into extraverts

If you do this, you risk giving them the wrong message — that it is not acceptable to be an introvert. They will have enough people giving them this message; they don't need their teachers or parents joining the choir.



Introversion: Issues for rural students

Gifted students from rural and remote areas who have lived all or much of their lives in the country and who move to boarding schools to complete their education may experience particular difficulties if they are introverts. The constant presence of other people, the crowds, the continual chatter, the emphasis on competition in sports and, above all, the absence of privacy in sleeping, eating, learning and leisure time can be extremely distressing.



Paul, aged 16, was sent to a boys' boarding school in a large city two years ago. He lives on a remote property two hours' drive from the next settlement and all his previous education was through correspondence and School of the Air. For weeks on end he would see only his family and the people who worked on the property and he was content with this way of life. 'We have literally thousands of books,' he says, 'because mum and dad and grandpa are great readers and so was my grandmother before she died, and from as far back as I remember bookstores in the city would send up packages of new books every few weeks.'

Boarding school came as a severe culture shock.

'There were times when I thought I would go mad,' says Paul. 'I was surrounded by noise all the time. It just never stopped and even when I did try to get as far away as I could — I would go right out to the end of the oval when no one was there and sit down with my head between my knees trying to shut things out — the noise still seemed to be there inside my head.'

'Nobody seemed to be able to discuss things quietly. It was cool to be raucous and the teachers didn't seem to be able or willing to do anything about it. And answers had to be snapped back and I just can't do that. I need space to think. One of the teachers used to shout at me, "Snap out of it and snap it out" and that caused great hilarity, and any time I delayed in answering after that someone would shout it.'

'The worst thing was having no silence at night. I'm used to the absolute quiet of home where all you hear at night are the stock and the wind and there would be continual noise — beds creaking, kids snoring, traffic noises in the distance, planes going over. And having no privacy at night; that was even worse in a way.'



This year Paul's parents moved him to another school which has a special 'acclimatisation' program for students coming in from the land and things are a little better because there are teachers who are rather more understanding and a school counsellor who himself was a gifted boy from the bush and understands the situation for these students. However, he has had a rough two years.



*Ellie, who is now herself a teacher, remembers her years at boarding school as being 'years of compromise'. 'I missed the smell and sound of the bush almost unbearably — the homesickness was physical, like an ache inside me — but the quality of the education I was getting was just amazing. The teachers were wonderful and they realised I was bright and encouraged me to excel. In addition I was able to talk to them about how I was feeling and they really tried to understand. The other girls were a problem sometimes because they were very lively and always chattering and I really need spaces of silence — but I love reading and they would understand that I would just have to go away sometimes and be by myself. Really I would have been happy to **be** by myself outside class hours — I'm not much of a socialiser even now and I'm content in my own company and with my husband and two or three good friends; I don't seem to need **groups** of people as much as most other people do.'*

It is important that schools anticipate and respect the social and emotional needs of gifted students who are introverts in environments which are, understandably, designed for the majority of young people who are extraverts.