

R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion

Let's Talk About It:

Designing Discussions Where
Extroverts Practice Listening and
Introverts Practice Talking

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What the Students Say

For today's students, discussion skills are critical.

Yet, as teachers know too well: engaging introverts and extroverts in class discussion can be a challenge. Our research and methods show that it's possible -- and students see the impact immediately.

"I have spoken up a lot more compared to other class discussions, and I definitely feel more comfortable asking questions and sharing in discussions. I also have learned how to not just present stagnant, standalone points, but how to add onto the points of my classmates and connect our discussion to other things."

- 9th grade introvert

"I have grown during discussion cycles because I listen to other people's ideas and opinions instead of just sharing my own. I feel like I have grown at showing that I am listening by making eye contact and paying attention to whoever is talking."

- 8th grade extrovert

"I am not nervous to speak anymore."

- 8th grade introvert

"I have gotten better at not interrupting people while they are talking."

- 7th grade extrovert

"I think I've gotten better at choosing the right moments to speak, and the right ones to listen."

- 9th grade extrovert

"I have really grown. I've been asking more questions and I've been gaining courage to provide time to write down important information. Always being prepared and having an outline is helpful to base what you are going to talk about. However, you can always venture into a different area during discussion, and I've really grown in that area too."

- 7th grade introvert

"I normally speak a lot during discussions, so it has been a goal of mine to make sure everyone has been heard. I have improved my skills of listening and making sure everyone gets heard throughout this cycle."

- 9th grade extrovert

**Today's teachers know that belonging precedes learning.
If students do not feel heard, valued, and supported in
expressing themselves, they won't learn best.**

For decades, though, too many schools have created environments designed for the preferences and learning styles of students of a certain temperament: that is, students who identify as extroverts. In so doing, they have inadvertently devised systems and practices that alienate, disenfranchise, or – worse – penalize introverts.

They do so at the expense of introverted students, yes, but also at the expense of the extroverts. Today's “typical” classroom might not accommodate the preferences of introverts, but it also does not instruct extroverts on a critical skill: actively listening and making space for other voices in discussion. **It's essential that schools create environments where all types of learners can thrive – and where they can feel empowered to share their voices and ideas in ways that feel comfortable and accessible for them.**

So the question is: How can teachers use class discussion as a tool to help introverts grow as speakers and extroverts grow as listeners while also appreciating each other's natural strengths?



In this paper, we'll discuss:

- » Current research on how introverted and extroverted students learn
- » How the “typical” classroom works against introverts
- » Why it's important for students of all temperaments to learn to speak – and listen
- » How R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion helps build skills and a sense of belonging for introverts and extroverts – **at the same time!**

Introverts and Extroverts: What They Are and How They Learn

Whether we realize it or not, our classrooms are full of introverts. One-third to one-half of the population identify as introverts, or people who derive more energy from time spent alone than with a crowd.

Historically, there has been some confusion regarding the overlap between introversion and shyness. While introverts are typically more reserved and introspective, they need not be shy. Rather, the term “introversion” pertains more to how people generate energy: namely, do they derive it from groups, crowds, and external stimuli, or do these situations drain them? **Introverts and extroverts may both enjoy a social gathering, but extroverts may find themselves re-energized after attending, whereas introverts may feel the need to “recharge” with some alone time.**

An EdWeek [article](#) describes the distinction when it comes to student temperaments: “A shy student, once he or she overcomes the fear, may turn out to be an extrovert, invigorated by being the center of attention. By contrast, an introverted child may be perfectly comfortable speaking in class or socializing with a few friends, but ‘recharges her batteries’ by being alone and is most energized when working or learning in an environment with less stimulation.” Distinctions between introverts and extroverts can emerge as early as age four.

For adolescents and adults, introversion and extroversion are typically self-reported distinctions, and where an individual falls on the temperament spectrum is imperfect, imprecise, and variable. [According to](#) Northwestern University Professor Dan McAdams, who studies personality development, personality is “more about traits than types. And traits are linear continua.”

It’s important to note that not all introverts and extroverts have the same traits. They don’t all act in the same way, and they don’t all have the same in-class preferences. Exploring their general differences, though, can be helpful in constructing an ideal in-class environment for all learners.

“There are really two aspects to introversion/extroversion,” explained Heidi Kasevich, the visionary behind the “Quiet Education” movement and an expert on introversion and extroversion, in a conversation with R.E.A.L.® founder Liza Garonzik. “One has to do with sensitivity to stimulation from the outside world. **Introverts feel most happy and alive in quiet settings and show a sensitivity to social and sensory stimuli, from crowds to bright lights.**” In the classroom, then, it stands to reason that introverts would feel most comfortable when working alone or in small groups, and in quieter, calmer atmospheres.

“The other aspect of defining introversion/extroversion is sensitivity to rewards,” says Kasevich. “The dopamine pathway is more active in the brains of extroverts, who feel energized at the expectation of a reward such as winning a medal in a track race, getting their name in the school newspaper, making friends with a stranger in the cafeteria, or even getting called on in class. **When you have extroverts raising their hands in class – yes, they probably have a quicker sort of processing style. But they also get a dopamine rush from the ‘reward’ of being called on.**”

The “typical” classroom – characterized by bright lights, constant chatter, hand-raising and calling-up-on, and the expectation of rewards for frequent vocal participation, is the type of environment that drains introverted students while rewarding extroverted ones.

The consequence of the typical classroom environment is that introverts may choose to opt out of class discussion, and extroverts may not have as many opportunities to practice listening to their more reserved peers. That’s problematic for both temperament types.

The Trouble with the “Typical” Classroom

As Susan Cain, the author of [Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking](#), said in a now-famous [TED Talk](#), “Our most important institutions – our schools and our workplaces – are designed mostly for extroverts and for extroverts’ need for lots of stimulation.”

Indeed, in rejecting the lecture-based classes of the mid-20th century, schools have created classrooms that demand active participation and collaboration. [Research conducted at Southeastern University in 2022](#), which examines the relationship between student temperament and teacher perception, found that these types of classrooms can produce environments in which “introverted students may find themselves being asked to behave in ways inconsistent with their personality type and without adequate time for processing and reflection.”

Class design is just a symptom of a more entrenched, more insidious problem. According to Cain, “the vast majority of teachers report believing that the ideal student is an extrovert...even though introverts actually get better grades and are more knowledgeable, according to research.”

That belief not only unfairly penalizes introverts – it also doesn’t produce the best outcomes in classrooms. According to Kasevich, “research shows that in a team of six to eight, you have three people doing 70% of the talking. If you translate that into the way we typically assess for classroom participation, which is based on quantity rather than quality of speech, then we’re really leaving behind a third to half of our student population.”

Kasvich explains, though, that this isn’t an intentional slight: “It’s inadvertent. I don’t think there are any teachers out there who are trying to wage war on the introverts. It’s just that the ‘extrovert ideal’ became embedded in school life.”

Teaching in ways that align with such an “extrovert ideal” does not engender a sense of belonging for introverts, who may feel anxious and drained when they come to class – particularly to classes where they’re expected to participate vocally. They may not feel that their way of thinking and learning belongs in the classroom. As a result, they may not find the opportunity to develop and share their thoughts and opinions, and extroverted students may not realize the commensurate opportunity to benefit from those perspectives.

A 2020 [study](#) of students across Finland found a correlation between introverts with high social engagement and higher self-esteem. “Our results implied that introverts should be given extra support when they encounter group work in school,” concluded the researchers.



How to Support Introverts in Class

In-class support for introverts takes various forms, including:

- Offering designated “moments of quiet” for preparation and processing ([Skinner et al., 2016](#) and [Coprledge et al., 2021](#))
- Using metacognitive routines to increase predictability ([Ritchhart et al., 2011](#) and [Harvard Project Zero](#))
- Naming, assessing, and celebrating non-verbal contributions ([Skinner et al., 2019](#))



“Introverts are deep, reflective thinkers,” says Cain. “They’re careful thinkers. They come up with insights that others don’t just by sitting and thinking things through rather than verbalizing ideas right away... In the company of introverts, extroverts feel permission to be themselves and to talk more deeply, while introverts find that extroverts bring them into a more carefree and lighthearted zone.”

Kasevich concurs with this thinking. “The introvert is taking the time to really think and then, later on, if they believe the space is safe enough, the introvert will be able to vocalize their thoughts,” she says.

A [study](#) exploring the differences in argumentation style between introverted and extroverted students found “striking” differences between the two personality types: introverted students typically preferred a “co-constructive” argumentation style, whereas conflictual argumentation was more strongly associated with extroverts. “It is important to note that unlike the extroverts, the relatively more introverted students did not rigidly adhere to different sides of the argument and attempt to win others over to their side,” explains E. Michael Nussbaum, the author of the study. “Rather, the introverts worked together to build and critique solutions” (Nussbaum, 2002).”

In class and in life, extroverts will need the ability to work collaboratively with others toward a solution, as well as the skill of debating and defending their own ideas. Truly, both types of students have important lessons to learn from the other’s learning styles.

Developing the skill of co-constructive argumentation is important for extroverts as well as introverts. Today’s typical classroom, though, doesn’t create the ideal space for the sustained, multifaceted growth of both introverts and extroverts. As a result, teachers are constantly writing comments like: “I wish we heard your voice more often!” to their introverted students and “While I love hearing your ideas, I hope that in the next discussion you can leave space for others” to their extroverted ones. These two types of comments don’t acknowledge specific tactical moves students can make to engage with their classmates in discussion – which would be part of a carefully-designed discussion learning environment.

So the question for educators is: how can we design class discussion to engage, challenge, and celebrate extroverts and introverts alike?

It's Critical That Today's Kids Learn to Speak – *and* Listen

A classroom defined by true belonging is a place where students of both temperaments feel safe and challenged. Regardless of whether chatter energizes or drains them, regardless of whether they need external stimuli or internal quietude to generate their best ideas, students need to learn how to be active participants in discussion. **They need to do this in order to succeed in school, yes – but, more importantly, they need to do this in order to succeed in life.**

Introverts will be in situations – in friendships, in job interviews, and in relationships – where they need to share their voices even amid overstimulating environments.

Extroverts, conversely, will be in situations that require them to learn to quiet the craving for the dopamine boost that comes from speaking, so they can truly, effectively *listen*.

“You don’t get a pass for your personality type,” says Dr. Kendall Hoyt, a professor at Dartmouth Medical School. “I understand that social anxiety is a real thing – I am an introvert, and my mother used to actually faint if she had to do public speaking – but part of my job as a teacher is to teach people how to articulate and be heard.”

Likewise, it’s a teacher’s job to help extroverts see the benefit in the quieter but equally important aspects of conversation. “Should teachers consider the times that a student gives silent assent to a question or thoughtfully jots notes for a future essay as participation?” queries Katherine Schultz, the author of [Rethinking Classroom Participation: Listening to Silent Voices](#), in a [Washington Post article](#). “It’s important to note that one student’s silence can enable another student to speak. Do students have a responsibility to contribute to the silence of a classroom so that others can talk, along with a responsibility to contribute verbally to the discussion?”

In a world where teens spend more time in front of screens than faces, the opportunities to learn these social skills – that is, the skill of speaking and the skill of making space for others to speak – are fewer and further between. **It makes it all the more critical, then, that both introverted and extroverted students step outside their respective comfort zones to learn and practice these skills in class discussion.**



How R.E.A.L.® Creates Discussions Where All Temperaments Belong

One way schools can help students of both temperaments feel empowered in discussion is through R.E.A.L.®, which was designed with the needs of both introverts and extroverts in mind.

“Discussion is fundamentally a deeply human experience,” says R.E.A.L.® founder Liza Garonzik. **“It’s at the heart of every classroom: whose voice is heard, how many times, who’s listening, and what that looks like.”**

Research-Driven Design

In designing R.E.A.L.®, we strived to help build equity in share of voice during student-led discussions. R.E.A.L.® was designed to align with research-driven recommendations around temperament inclusivity, including:

- » **Giving students processing time before and after discussion** with Discussion Question (DQ) Prep, In Real Time (IRT) Notes, and End of Day Reflections
- » **Introducing metacognitive reflection questions**, such as naming how each student contributes to the discussion, acknowledging that contributions will look different for different people, and encouraging classmates to give “shoutouts” to one another
- » **Encouraging non-verbal engagement**, which challenges extroverts and gives introverts a natural “win”
- » **Instituting classroom routines that make discussion more predictable**, which decreases social pressure

As part of the R.E.A.L.® program, students pass off commentary to one another. After one student speaks, they look around the room to see who wants to speak next. When they employ R.E.A.L.® skills, each student holds up a finger for every comment they’ve made. In practice, that helps put the brakes on the dopamine-seeking extroverts while inducing the whole group to coax introverts out of their shells.

“If I just spoke and see that Steve wants to speak, but Steve is holding up four fingers because he’s an extrovert and has already talked a bunch, but I see Joe is over there holding up a fist, which means he hasn’t talked yet at all, it’s my job to make space for Joe’s voice rather than the other way around – that is, rather than make Joe feel that he has to jump in before Steve does,” says Garonzik. “Little things like that empower students to feel confident facilitating discussion.”

Those little things make class participation a job for everyone – not just for the students clamoring to ensure their voices are heard. Tools and practices like this, which teachers learn in R.E.A.L.® PD and pass along to their students as part of the program, equip students with a method to decide who talks when, and it forces consideration before speaking – the exact type of practice that helps introverts thrive.



Increased Confidence for Introverts and Extroverts

As one R.E.A.L.[®] teacher at an all-girls school noted, “The defined preparation of the R.E.A.L.[®] model gave girls the ability to increase confidence and decrease impact of peer or teacher judgment...After learning the R.E.A.L.[®] method, the same girl who claimed that she would only speak up if she knew for a fact that she had concrete evidence stated, ‘I like that there is an actual way to prepare my evidence before the discussion. Now I know that I can speak up because I am already prepared.’”

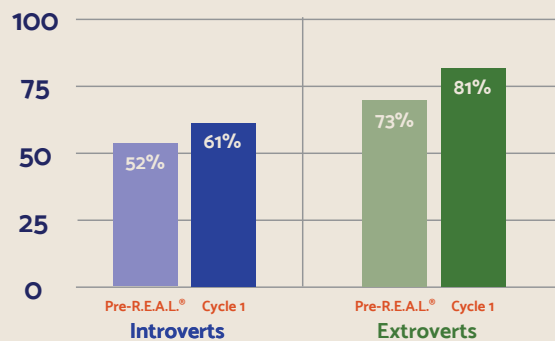
When we survey students at the conclusion of R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion cycles to assess their progress, we ask students to self-report as introverts or extroverts. Although it is an imprecise tool, it can give us insight into ways in which students with different temperaments develop comfort with discussion skills at different rates. When we studied the implementation of R.E.A.L.[®] at [Blair Academy](#), for example, we found that 50% of self-reported introverts felt comfortable asking a question in class pre-R.E.A.L.[®] After just three discussions, 88% of introverts were comfortable asking questions. After six discussions, 100% had gained that comfort and confidence.

Analysis from our most recent survey of over 2,300 middle and high schoolers shows similar results. Before beginning R.E.A.L.[®] Discussions, 52% of self-described introverts thought they would be **able to get their voice in if they had something to say during class discussion**, versus 73% of self-described extroverts. After three R.E.A.L.[®] Discussions, **that number had jumped to 60% of introverts and 81% of extroverts** – indicating that the method sparks a sense of confidence and belonging for students of both temperaments.

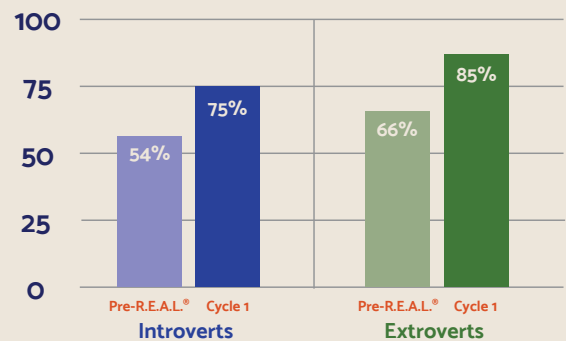
We’ve seen a notable jump in students’ perceptions that their **classmates listen to them during class discussion** as well: a 21-point increase for introverts and 19-point increase for extroverts.

Notably, responses from the self-reported introverts surpassed where extroverts started out within just three discussions, or one R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion Cycle.

“I know I’m going to be able to get my voice in if I have something to say.”



“I feel like my classmates listen to me in class discussions.”



The R.E.A.L.® method doesn't just tell students to speak up and listen in class – it teaches them *how* to speak up and *how* to listen in class. It gives them predictable, concrete moves they can make during discussion, allowing them to challenge themselves while leaning into their strengths.

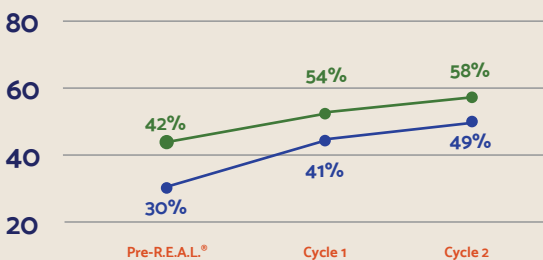
The result? Students of all temperaments grow in comfort and confidence during class discussion.

Indeed, over the course of two R.E.A.L.® Discussion Cycles (i.e., six discussions), we saw dramatic increases in self-identified introverts' comfort level using discussion skills. **Introverts reported a 13-point increase in comfort asking a question during class discussions after their teachers instituted R.E.A.L.®, and a 19-point increase in feeling comfortable disagreeing with classmates during class discussions.**

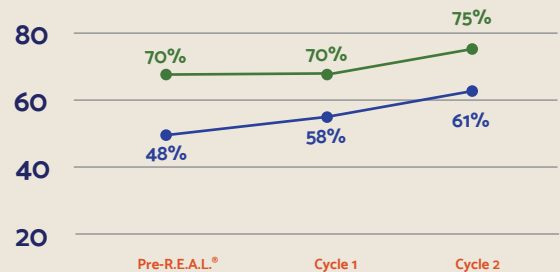
While we're encouraged by these data, we're equally delighted to hear anecdotes from teachers about the growth they are seeing from their students after each cycle. One high school teacher commented that a big highlight for him was seeing "that confidence that's built when students actually know that they are learning something by listening to their classmates."

A middle school teacher at an all-girls school echoed that sentiment: "I was worried about how I was going to engage the students who are quieter...the ones who don't feel like they necessarily have a lot to say. But throughout the process, especially after our first couple of discussions, I saw much more leveling of the playing field. Girls who typically talked more started to understand that airtime needs to be shared. And girls who tended to be quieter started to feel like it wasn't really that hard to say something if they listened and made a comment or asked a question."

After six discussions, both introverts and extroverts report that it isn't "scary or hard to disagree in a graded class discussion."



After six discussions, both introverts and extroverts also report higher levels of comfort asking questions in a class discussion.



■ Introverts ■ Extroverts

Students themselves have much to say about how they've grown after completing a R.E.A.L.® Discussion Cycle – in notably different ways:

"I think I've gotten better at choosing the right moments to speak, and the right ones to listen."
– 8th grade extrovert

"I've been getting braver. I'm also happy to engage with my classmates."
– 8th grade introvert

Empowering All Students

We're working hard to empower every student – introvert, extrovert, or somewhere in between – with the skills we know they need to succeed in conversations, whether they happen in class or in life.

Our research-backed program employs methods that encourage introverts to share their voices in a way that feels comfortable for them while instructing extroverts in both the need for and the mechanics of listening actively and making room for more voices.

If you're interested in joining us on our mission to teach these skills, we'd love to chat.

Reach out today to learn more.

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R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion

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