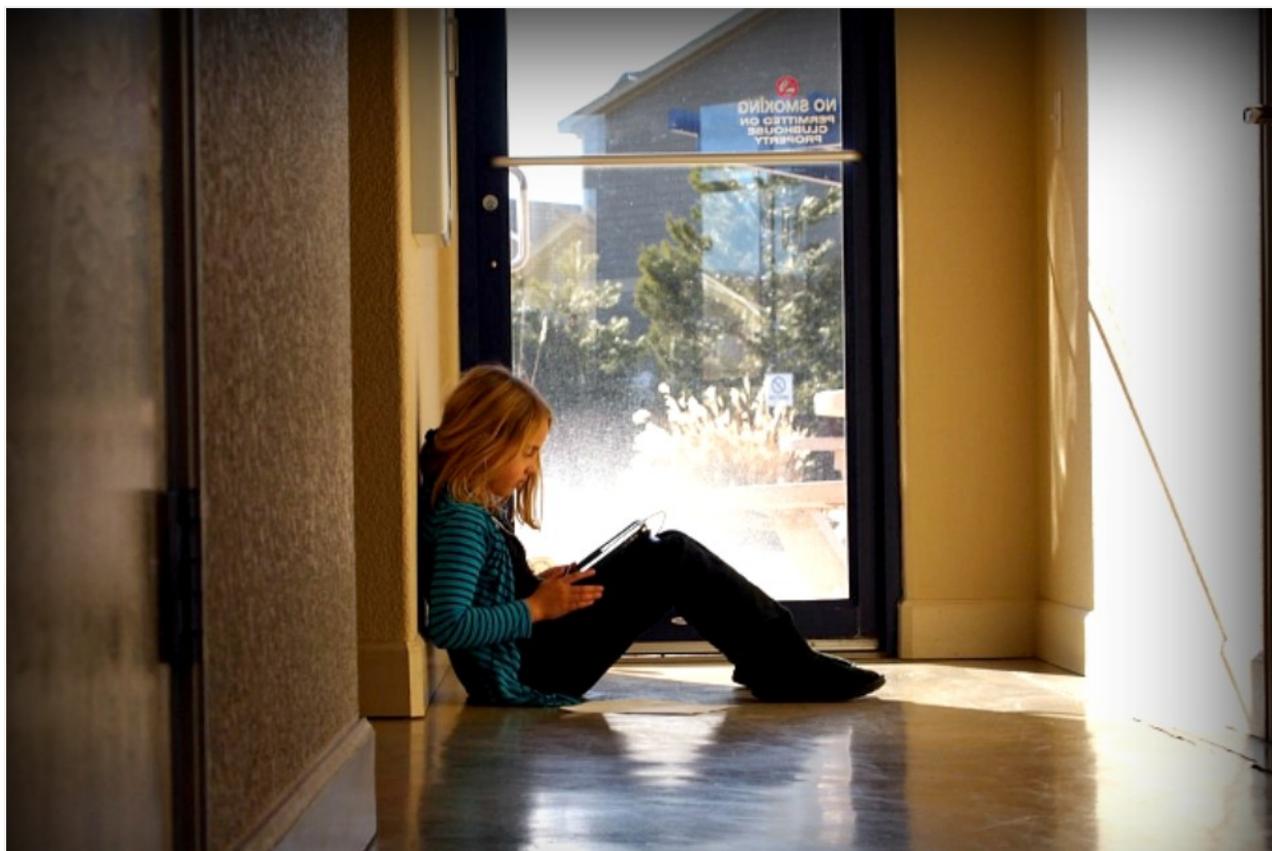


# The Atlantic

## When Schools Overlook Introverts

As the focus on group work and collaboration increases, classrooms are neglecting the needs of students who work better in quiet settings.



Brad Flickinger / Flickr

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TEXT SIZE



When Susan Cain published *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* nearly four years ago, it was immediately met with acclaim. The book criticizes schools and other key institutions for primarily accommodating extroverts and such individuals' "need for lots of stimulation." Much to introverts' relief, it also seeks to raise awareness about the personality type, particularly among [those who've struggled to](#)

understand it.

It seems that such efforts have, for the most part, struggled to effect much change in the educational world. The way in which certain instructional trends—education buzzwords like “collaborative learning” and “project-based learning” and “flipped classrooms”—are applied often neglect the needs of introverts. In fact, these trends could mean that classroom environments that embrace extroverted behavior—through dynamic and social learning activities—are being promoted now more than ever. These can be appealing qualities in the classroom, of course, but overemphasizing them can undermine the learning of students who are inward-thinking and easily drained by constant interactions with others.

Just last week the [University of Chicago library](#) announced that in response to “increased demand,” librarians are working with architects to transform a presumably quiet reading room into a “vibrant laboratory of interactive learning.” One writer on Top Hat, a popular online resource for educators, argued in a post last month that “cooperative learning strategies harness the greatest part of human evolutionary behavior: sociality.” And earlier this month, [Cal State University, Dominguez Hills](#), promoted their installation of “active learning classrooms” with “multiple desk formations” in which “professors must change their mindsets” because “the lectures should be designed to learn by doing.” Hamoud Salhi, a professor and acting associate dean, explains, “This project is not just about changing the classroom environment; it is also about changing how instructors approach teaching.”

Meanwhile, [some advocates](#) for “active learning classrooms” write about “breaking students and faculty out of their comfort zones” like it’s a good thing, and [other teachers](#) continue to conflate introversion and an inability to self-advocate. [Dartmouth’s Institute for Writing and Rhetoric](#) advertises a pedagogy that “seeks to overhaul the model of education” and challenges

students to “forego passivity in favor of contribution and participation...students must overcome isolation in order to learn to write.” And Liz Sproat, head of Google for Education—an organization that doesn’t see a profit when students simply read quietly and think introspectively—situates “the increase in collaborative working” as an agreed-upon premise in [an article on ComputerWeek.com](#), one that Google can make more “cost-effective.”

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## **Introverts “feel at their most alive and their most switched-on when they’re in quieter, low-key environments.”**

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This growing emphasis in classrooms [on group projects](#) and other interactive arrangements can be challenging for introverted students who tend to [perform better when they’re working independently and in more subdued environments](#). Comprising anywhere from one third to [about half](#) of the population, introverts sometimes appear shy, depressed, or antisocial, when that’s not always the case. As Susan Cain put it in her famous [TED Talk](#), introverts simply “feel at their most alive and their most switched-on and their most capable when they’re in quieter, more low-key environments.”

I started reflecting on this recently after observing classes at a public high school in California. (I teach English at a different public high school and visited the school as a professional-development activity.) All but four of the 26 teachers I witnessed had their students arranged in groups or with partners. Such formations aren’t necessarily irreconcilable with the needs of introverts, but these arrangements can inherently enable noisy, distracting conditions that make learning particularly difficult for certain students.

Many of my own high-school students regularly request extended sessions of

silent reading. Some prefer learning with the fluorescent classroom lights off, instead relying on the softer sunlight coming in through the window. Some admit to enjoying the opportunity to work in a quiet room and are eager to write about certain prompts for as long as I let them. I used to think their ubiquitous earbuds were feeding their need for stimulation; now I wonder if they're sometimes blocking out the noise.

These are, of course, generalized observations, but I recently met with two high-school students who spoke directly and frankly about their need for quiet, solitary learning environments. Both of proudly spoke of their success at [Grizzly Youth Academy](#), a 22-week charter-school program in San Luis Obispo, California, targeted at teens who've had a "history of school failure" at a previous school. Asked what she thought facilitated her success, one student responded: "The structure—I can concentrate here." Acknowledging her tendency to get distracted, the student noted that there was "absolutely no quiet time" at her former public school, and she now appreciates the disciplined classes and quiet study hall sessions. "I'm like a completely different person now."

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The other student, whom I interviewed separately, offered similar reflections: "It's more focused here [at the charter school], and noisier there [at the public school]. I have ADD so I'm usually distracted." Beaming, he added, "but now I'm getting the best grades ever. I'm able to concentrate here more."

It's striking to me that a premise on Grizzly's website is that there are

“students who struggle in school [because they] often lack social and emotional skills to succeed in the classroom,” and the students themselves are quick to diagnose themselves with an inability to concentrate at their former school. The improvement they’re describing at Grizzly, however, isn’t based on a cure for a dysfunction or a breakthrough in social skills—it’s just a significant change in environment. And in the five Grizzly classrooms I observed, the students sat in rows that Cain [nostalgically praised](#) in her talk—the traditional classroom setup in which, Cain said, “we did most of our work autonomously.”

Certainly, group activities can serve a purpose in the teaching of introverts. In part because of the Common Core standards and [the Internet increasingly serving as a proxy for classroom teachers](#), “cooperative learning” has grown in popularity among teachers in recent decades. As the English teacher Abigail Walthausen noted in *The Atlantic* two years ago, “Common Core standards place far greater value on small-group discussion and student-led work than on any teacher-led instruction.” And overall, this trend is a good thing. Several recent [studies](#) offer the latest evidence that students who engage in cooperative learning tend to outperform those immersed in traditional learning approaches—namely lectures. But cooperative learning doesn’t have to entail excessively social or overstimulating mandates; it can easily involve quiet components that facilitate internal contemplation.

Near the end of my observations last week, I told two teachers on separate occasions that I’d feel incredibly exhausted at the end of every day if I were a student at that school. To my surprise, both of them responded by immediately laughing and then agreeing. One recalled learning best when arranged in rows, while the other concurred, “I know, right? How exhausting it must be to have another student in your business all day long.”

The ideal, of course, would be to establish arrangements that facilitate

differentiated instruction for varying personality types, but this might be difficult in large classes with students of diverse levels of proficiency and motivation. I've noticed that, like Grizzly, the private schools I've visited also seem to create space for the introverted students, ultimately resembling the university classes to which they hope to send their students. And at the aforementioned public school I observed, three of the four classes where students were in fact seated individually in rows were AP or honors courses.

But I'm reminded of Sartre's famous line, "Hell is other people," when I see that [Georgia College](#)'s webpage dedicated to collaborative learning, which includes the topic sentence: "Together is how we do everything here at Georgia College. Learn. Work. Play. Live. Together." Everything, that is, except quiet introspection, free of cost and distraction.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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