

Silence is Golden: Learning from Introversion to Broaden  
Teaching and Learning Experiences in Management and Business

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The focus of this developmental paper is to discuss our work on introversion, supported by *The British Academy of Management (BAM)* Researcher Development Grant, awarded in 2014 January. We will discuss the background to applying for this grant, the progression of the project and surprises along the way, literature and methods, emerging findings from our research, ideas about theorisation, plans for feedback of our results, and future directions for research.

Our application to this grant was the culmination of ongoing conversations between us over a period of a year as colleagues in a business school. Through exchange about a teaching activity, we learned of our mutual interests in introversion, and in learning topics like the predominance of group work in University classrooms. We began discussing our experiences of introversion in both learning and management contexts, and we reflected on popular discourses in higher education, such as ‘student engagement’ and ‘experiential learning’. We realised the promise of pursuing empirical studies of the meanings around introversion and related concepts, wishing to explore people’s conceptualisations and experiences in a qualitative, open-ended way, not with psychometric testing or prescriptions as we came across in previous literature.

We were delighted to receive recognition from *BAM* on the value of this project and to have support for carrying forth our study. We asked undergraduate, postgraduate, and

Executive Education students if they would like to share, through an open-ended interview space, their views about learning and introversion. Through internal and external press releases, we were contacted by academics, a higher education administrator, and practitioners about their interest in sharing their experiences about introversion. We were surprised that our initial focus on learning and teaching expanded to practice-focussed interest, and we were overall pleasantly surprised at the excitement and interest generated by this project, with individuals contacting us from various UK locations as well as Africa and Canada.

Our literature review has ranged from work that has raised popular consciousness about introversion (Cain, 2013), to references to introversion in management literature (Baruch, 2006; Moutafi et al., 2007; Bendersky and Parikh Shah, 2013; Phillips and Bedeian, 1994) and to discussions of introversion and related concepts of silence and listening in education literature (Kahu, 2013; Nussbaum, 2002; Remedios et al. 2012). We are also working with non-Western and Western historical conceptualizations of introversion (Jung, 2013; Nandy, 1995). As our focus has been participant-led understandings of introversion, we will explore new literature for theorisation guided by our findings.

Briefly with regard to methods, we had some broad interview questions planned, and we asked new questions depending on the direction taken by the interviewee. We also distributed surveys to undergraduate and executive education students, with open-ended questions for qualitative analysis. We began analysing the data by listening to the interviews and repeatedly working with the transcripts, drawing out themes.

Our emergent findings include complexity of conceptualisations of introversion. Interviewees who expressed themselves as introverts or having introverted preferences discussed nuanced and complex understandings, yet confusion abounds in how others perceive introversion. For instance, some undergraduates consistently link introversion to shyness, to lack of confidence, views which are counter to the rich discussion of meanings of

introversion. We also noticed significant judgment coming through in some interviews, with statements such as introverted students being less easy to teach, to get on with, that they will not speak with the customers in business. This is becoming a strong theme – assumptions about attributes or limitations of introversion. The possible source of these judgments may be lack of understanding about the qualitative experience and range of introversion experiences, hence our analyses which will focus on sharing these insights.

Our findings also include introversion as a bodily experience – it is not only a discussion of ability, with views such as ‘introverts are good at x, extraverts at y’. Introversion is a lived physical experience, with references to energy, exhaustion, and similar bodily responses. In discussion of the lived experience of introversion, we are finding metaphors and potent words which will be analysed for illustrating the depth of introverted preferences or moments. All of these themes will be linked to implications for teaching pedagogy, and implications for management practice. Some respondents made direct reference to teaching and learning spaces, or management spaces, and there is also potential to study links between ideologies about ideal learning and teaching, and ideal management. With the latter, we have both questioned, reinforced through our emergent data analysis, why there seem to be similarities between education and work in terms of expecting students or employees to speak, disclose, display their experience and be heard. What is the meaning of the ongoing preference for extraversion, conceptualized as speaking out?

One of the most powerful themes has been silence, and its experience and interpretation in the classroom. We will be studying how silence is linked to, or understood as an experience of, introversion. There have been studies on silence in the classroom (e.g. Forrest, 2013), and we would like to understand when silence is appreciated in the classroom, and to demonstrate that students may be silent for many reasons – not only because they are not engaged, which we have encountered before and during this project to be a common

perception of silence in higher education. From our work, we find that silence can be used as a tool for reflection, yet as educators we nevertheless come across comments that engagement ought to be seen and heard. There are implications (e.g. Nussbaum, 2002) that silence is not an active form of learning, which we challenge. We will explore if views on silence in the classroom have any connection to wider societal views about introversion.

In terms of theorisation, we would like to develop the idea of introversion as an illness, introversion as the Other – with possible psychoanalytic resources on anxiety, and/or postcolonial resources on Othering, to help interrogate why introversion is seen as Other, as something that needs to be “fixed”. While people with introverted preferences appear to be Othered on the basis of “less” – less engaged, less likely to be leader, and so on, people identifying with introversion experience a positive self-discovery of their difference. Students or workers express happiness to finally understand why they have been feeling different (at the moments that they learned about or made sense of their experience of introversion). There is a welcome understanding of being different, not belonging to the in-group. Introversion and discovering one has introverted preferences then comes as a relief, a recognition of one’s identity, a discovery and acknowledgement of self. Here, theories of identity and subjectivity may help to make sense of these realizations.

We are planning theoretical contributions to the literature on experiential learning – for example, theorising what is meant by experience, in classrooms, meetings, and private study. There has been some recent critical interrogation of what is meant by experience in experiential learning (e.g. Tomkins and Ulus, 2014), and we would like to contribute to critical work in management education (e.g. Vince, 2010), specifically with regard to our findings on introversion and experience.

In terms of future directions, we plan to frame our results in a manner helpful to practitioners from the community who asked us to feedback our results. We will continue to

feedback our work by pursuing questions that are emerging from our grant work analyses. For instance, we are fascinated by cross-cultural studies on the meanings and experiences of introversion – what are some similarities and differences, and what are the implications for internationalisation of higher education and for cross-border working? We are planning to explore these questions in future field work, such as one author's ideas for conducting interviews in Dutch in the Netherlands, and another author's interviews in India and the United States. Ethnographic approaches like participant observation may support analysing the experiences and impact of introversion and extraversion, with follow-up interviews about people's interpretation of these concepts in day to day working.

Further exploration also includes probing the reasons for the favouring of extraversion, as indicated by our results – what are the social, cultural and political reasons for the structuring of organisations and education biased to extraversion? How can these be interrogated and challenged? We also find a stubborn lack of appreciation for silence, which we would like to analyze for future research. In fact, as we submit this paper, we recently noticed a list serv discussion, in which silence on an issue was questioned as potential lack of engagement or potential negative reasons, although the discussion of this issue had been posted only 24 hours earlier than this comment about silence. What do we stand to lose from assuming that voicing one's opinion immediately, whether in person or virtually, is a sign of engagement and interest, while a pause, a period of silence is perceived as not being interested? What do we stand to gain, by valuing silence as potentially transformative and supportive of our learning spaces and organizations? We eagerly continue the pursuit of these questions with our guiding frame of introversion.

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