



Episode 3: Grading Participation

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Podcast:

SUSAN: I'm Susan Cain and this is *Quiet: the Power of Introverts*.

SUSAN: Today, we're heading into the classroom. This is Greenwich Academy, the oldest girls prep school in Connecticut. It's idyllic, with stately buildings nestled into rolling hills....

TEACHER'S VOICE: We are smack in the middle of Macbeth right now so you've come at a great moment.

SUSAN: Almost enough to make me want to go back to school. Or not. As much as I've always loved learning and did well academically, there was one part of school that was very stressful – the pressure to speak up in class.

TEACHER'S VOICE: So, you tell me, what do you think's going on there? This third murderer shows up in the beginning of scene three? Serena.

SUSAN: In some classes, where I really loved the material and felt comfortable with my classmates, it came pretty easily. But

other times, I felt tongue-tied—especially because I knew that the ideal student was supposed to be outgoing and talkative. But I really loved to learn by listening and taking notes, and just...thinking. I still remember the shame that I felt when my parents came home from a parent-teacher conference reporting that my social studies teacher wished I weren't so quiet in class.

These days, many schools make class participation mandatory – it can count for up to 50 percent of a student's grade. This is happening at public and private schools all over the country.

But does grading class participation put quiet kids at a disadvantage? And is it an accurate indicator of students' engagement with the material?

That's why we're here at Greenwich Academy, where students and teachers got together and asked this very question. And surprisingly, for this bastion of tradition—the answer persuaded the entire school to rethink its approach to education.

MERYL: I asked, “has anyone ever said to you, in either written form or in spoken form ‘I wish she would participate more in class.’ I wish she would speak up more in class.”

SUSAN: That's Meryl French.

MERYL: And two girls who were in one of my research groups said, “Oh my gosh, yes! Absolutely. And it makes me so angry!” and it just sparked an incredible conversation.

SUSAN: At the time Meryl asked that question 3 years ago, she was faculty advisor at Greenwich Academy, and was working with students who had been selected to develop a research project with the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education.

Fired up by Meryl's question, the girls decided to research the role of temperament in the classroom. First, they developed surveys for both students and faculty.

CARLEY: When we did the research we asked the teachers what their ideal student would be like in the classroom.

SUSAN: That's Carley Patrone, one of the students who spearheaded the project.

CARLEY: And most of them said that their ideal student would

participate a lot and add helpful comments to the class and that felt sort of biased against people who learn better by being quiet and just listening and taking notes.

SUSAN: It might not surprise you to learn that Carley is also an introvert.

CARLEY: When I'm in class I learn better by just listening and taking notes and internalizing everything, because when I'm forced to participate I feel like it's always just distracting for me, because I have to think about what I'm going to say and like making an insightful comment, and then I end up like missing what the teacher's talking about.

SUSAN: It turned out Carly wasn't alone. Based on their survey, these students discovered that many introverts felt mandatory class participation worked against them. After analyzing their data, they ran a focus group among the faculty. Again, Meryl French.

MERYL: All of a sudden one of the teachers said, "Oh my goodness! I think that I have been paying more attention to students who call out. They were talking about the student who jumps up and has a quick response, who's comfortable speaking in a group, who doesn't need lead time, who has a sudden inspirational thought and needs to blurt it out, and also the students who need to speak in order to think as opposed to other students who need to think in order to speak.

SUSAN: OK. I'm going to repeat what Meryl just said so it sinks in—some people need to SPEAK in order to THINK, while others need to THINK in order to SPEAK.

MERYL: And the collective group had an epiphany about what it was like for students who were less inclined to speak and they were very excited about it.

SUSAN: It wasn't long after this that Meryl contacted me to tell me that the entire faculty read my book *Quiet* over the summer break. The book shows how our society often favors the showmanship of the extrovert, and has designed many of our institutions to reward this behavior over the ways introverts express themselves. So when the Greenwich research students and teachers returned in the fall, they worked together to try out some changes in the classroom.

MERYL: I think the biggest change in the school was not only that a lens had been shown on what it was like for students to be introverted in a classroom filled with students that were extroverted but also, what does "participation" mean?

SUSAN: Later in the program, we'll hear how this school-wide discussion led the venerable Greenwich Academy to do something radical—redefine what classroom participation means.

But first let's take a step back, and find out how today's ideal of confident students jumping into the conversation came to be. It turns out that it wasn't always the norm. 19th century classrooms were in fact very quiet. I asked Emily Klein, a professor of education at Montclair State University, just when and why our schools turned up the volume.

EMILY: One theory that a number of colleagues and I discussed was the idea that in the early 20th century you had huge waves of immigration and then you had child labor laws change, so many more kids went to school all of the sudden. So now we have, especially in urban areas, lots of kids we need to educate and many of them are foreign so there is a movement to Americanize these kids. And that focuses largely on behaviors.

SUSAN: And as I wrote about in *Quiet*, it so happened that around this time, what it meant to be successful in America was undergoing its own transformation. We used to live in what historians call a Culture of Character – where we valued people based on their inner work. Abraham Lincoln was praised for being “a man who did not offend by superiority.” But now, being quiet and modest was out. And in was a man who urged the nation to win friends and influence people.

EMILY: At the same time, you have someone like Dale Carnegie coming up through the ranks, talking about the sort of positive assertive speaking voice that you need to have and my sense is that that became a very American jovial kind of construct that worked its way into how we think about schooling.

SUSAN: So, according to Klein, part of the reason our classrooms moved toward verbal participation was not because it was good for learning, but, really, just because it echoed cultural trends. In fact, says Klein, there isn't any hard data on whether our modern ideas of participation have had a positive effect on learning.

EMILY: You know, I've really come a long way thinking about this. There's certainly a feeling that everyone should learn to present and speak in public and I think that that's valuable but I think that we have made a really big mistake in grading class participation. I think that it confuses classroom participation

with knowledge acquisition. And it certainly rewards certain kinds of behaviors over other kinds of behaviors.

SUSAN: And as we broaden how we think about participation, we're able to create an environment that works for all students.

EMILY: When I think about this I really think about it on a continuum, right? And we want to move our really loud, extroverted kids to figuring out how to be more thoughtful, and quiet and listening. And we want to help our introverted kids, when appropriate, find ways to speak and use their voice. But if you think about it only as the introverted kids, you're thinking about it as a deficit model, you're only saying that something is wrong and they need to be fixed and the correct right model is the extroverted model. As opposed to thinking about how we all need to grow and learn on this continuum.

SUSAN: Forcing students to speak up in class before they really have anything to say, puts pressure on all of them—introverts and the extroverts—to perform rather than actually learn.

JESS: I've been teaching for a long time and over those seventeen years found that my students were getting more and more hesitant, more afraid, more reluctant to take intellectual leaps in the classroom and in front of their peers.

SUSAN: That's Jess Lahey, a former public middle school teacher and the author of the New York Times bestselling book *The Gift of Failure*.

JESS: They didn't want to come across as anything less than effortlessly smart. And that effortless intelligence, that effortless smart seemed to become the enemy of my classroom because those kids were so concerned with being perfect all the time that they weren't learning.

SUSAN: We'll hear more from Jess Lahey in a moment, and turn back to Greenwich Academy. But first, a word from our generous sponsors.

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Podcast:

SUSAN: And we're back. This is *Quiet: The Power of Introverts*. I'm Susan Cain.

We're talking with Jess Lahey about the problems of grading classroom participation.

Jess is a former public middle school teacher and author of the bestselling book *The Gift of Failure*. We met not long after Jess wrote an article for The Atlantic magazine about class participation. Her reasons for writing about it came from a

surprising place...

JESS: I was seeing a lot of over-parenting happen with the parents of my students, and when this mother in particular really came and the way she came at me was quite aggressive. It took me a while to really get where that aggression was coming from. But as a teacher I understand that when a parent comes to talk to me often there are a few personalities at work there, there's the child, there's the parent, and then there's the child that the parent was and the wrongs they're trying to right. That's always a constant with parent-teacher conferences. And so I had to sort of separate those two things and not get defensive about the mom coming to my classroom to berate me for the way I was neglecting her child's development, from the fact that she had a very legitimate concern, which was that I was overlooking her daughter and it couldn't be ignored that I was overlooking her daughter because I was hardly ever speaking to her daughter. Her daughter didn't want to talk to me, she didn't have much to say in class, she was not just introverted but also shy, which I came to understand the difference there, and had some social anxiety, and that's separate too. And at the same time education has been moving toward a more problem-based, project-based, peer-led experience. So as I started to do things that worked better for students from a gift of failure perspective, which is about fostering intrinsic motivation in kids rather than trying to draw them out through and make them succeed through extrinsic motivators—like bribes for awards, points, scores, that kind of thing. As I started doing more and more of that I noticed that my introverted slash shy slash anxiety-ridden kids were coming out of their shell.

SUSAN: Jess began to understand that participating in class didn't just mean being the loudest. Introverts had other ways of engaging with the material and their peers.

JESS: Were they talking to their classmates? Were they participating in those group discussions? And I had to watch more carefully, I had to stand back, close my own mouth and watch them interact with each other, and that counts as class participation. Not just raising their hand and speaking out to the entire class. Are they functioning as a part of a group? Are they ever taking on any kind of role of leadership in that group? And the answer is usually yes. Maybe not in the whole class, maybe not with all twenty kids, but definitely in a group of two or three or five or six. So that counts as class participation as well.

SUSAN: There are lots of ways to assess a student's engagement with the material that go beyond grading class

participation.

But Jess still thinks it's important that introverted kids be guided – constructively – to find their voices in the classroom. (And by the way I happen to agree with her – as long as it's handled sensitively and respects the legitimacy of these kids' natural preferences to learn more quietly and autonomously.)

JESS: I'm all for independent work as an adjunct to classroom work, but I also think it's really important from an emotional learning perspective, from an empathy perspective, from a character development perspective to have those moments where you must interact with the other kids to do that perspective-taking, have those little Atticus Finch moments where you walk around in someone else's shoes for a while. So I think a little bit of both would be ideal.

SUSAN: If you have a quiet child, you may need to help their teacher better understand an introvert's temperament. But how you approach that conversation is so important. Think of that teacher as a partner—don't forget that you're both interested in getting the best out of your child.

JESS: We're in a place right now because education is going through so much tumult right now that parents and teachers have been.... we've really sort of created our own encampments and we're lobbing grenades back and forth at each other, and it's a fairly rare thing when a parent comes to a teacher and says "I really want to work with you, I trust your judgment in the education arena, but let me help you understand my child."

SUSAN: What are some techniques either that you've used or that parents have suggested to you of how to get to know that child and connect with them?

JESS: One mom asked me just to start talking to her kid more outside of class, and I did, I went up to her in the locker room between classes and told her I liked her boots, or you know whatever, some small thing, noticed when her hair was slightly different, listen to her friends. Listen to what she talked about with her friends. I have lunch duty so I can walk around tables and hear what kids are talking about and I can say, "Oh I didn't know you played soccer, you know let's talk about that. What position do you play?" without it feeling forced. I think even just reaching out and showing that you're interested in a kid is enough to turn the tables on a relationship.

SUSAN: For Jess, helping quiet kids feel comfortable in her classroom can be as simple as getting to know them better,

and allowing kids of all temperaments to find their voices.

To see what this change of perspective can do at a school-wide level, let's return to Greenwich Academy in Connecticut. Remember, the whole Greenwich faculty decided to read my book and learn more about how introverts can thrive. So, what happened next?

SARAH: Other questions? You guys tell me... do you want to take 20 minutes now and go through your scripts and stage an act or do you want to talk about the reading and then take the last 20 minutes to do that. [students speaking] The staging first? Ok, so let's do that.

SARAH: One of the first things that happened in the wake of having discussed *Quiet* as a faculty was that a lot of teachers, myself included, moved away from the term "participation" and toward the term "engagement."

SUSAN: Sarah Holshue teaches English at Greenwich Academy.

SARAH: I actually don't use the word participation at all in my classroom or my course policy sheet or anything like that because I feel really strongly that when kids read participation they read, "I have to raise my hand a certain number of times in a class, I have to speak for the sake of speaking, I'm gonna be graded or evaluated on how vocal I am," and that's not what I want them to think and that's not what I want in my classroom at all.

SUSAN: Carley, the student who worked on the study that sparked the discussion at Greenwich Academy, says subtle changes like these make a big difference.

CARLEY: Some teachers did this thing where they would break us up into groups or they'd be like talk to your partner next to you and about what we just learned. And to me, that was a way less intimidating than talking to the entire class. And then afterwards, as a group the two of us could say, "oh, we were confused on this." That was a way less intimidating way to bring up our questions.

SUSAN: And it's also encouraging to have teachers who acknowledge what a quiet child brings to the table.

CARLEY: Thinking before you talk is not a bad thing and there are some things you're good at that other people may not be good at because of that.

SARAH: I'm really appreciative of high schoolers who are good listeners. That's a pretty unusual quality and often a quality I see going along with introverted students, they're really engaged listeners. They nod when their classmates talk. They sort of internalize what's happening in conversation and take good notes about it. I also find that a good way to tell if a kid is engaged is by reading their writing. So, if they're responding in writing with specific references to the text, with ideas that they've incorporated from things that their classmates have talked about, that to me is more important than how often they're speaking in class or how present vocally they are.

SUSAN: And as we make room for all types of participation we get away from kids raising their hands just for the sake of a grade. Here's Jess Lahey.

JESS: Kids need to feel autonomous, they need to have some control over the details of their learning, they need to feel competent, and they need to feel connected to the teacher, to their classmates, to the material they're learning. And the nice thing is that if you back off on the carrot and stick approach, you tend to get more buy-in with intrinsic motivation, you tend to get kids who feel more ownership over their learning.

SUSAN: So does that mean then stepping away from grading for class participation?

JESS: I would be willing to say, yeah, at this point in my career I'm seeing enough problems with the grading process in and of itself and the points for this and points for that and arguing over .5 of a percentage point—you know, all that kind of stuff. I'd be willing to say at this point that um I think there's a good likelihood that kids will feel more engaged for the sake of engagement if we're not attaching points to it. And that's, that's a turnaround for me, I didn't think I would ever say that.

SUSAN: That's educator Jess Lahey, author of *The Gift of Failure*.

[audio of students in the classroom working together]

SUSAN: And that's what it takes. Whether students are getting silly with technology and Shakespeare like these girls at Greenwich Academy, or raising their hands to make comments in class, parents and teachers can make classrooms a place where the quiet and loud students will be heard equally. We just have to broaden our view of how we see class participation.

If you're interested in having your school understand more

about the power of quiet students and how to teach them, we at Quiet Revolution are developing a Quiet Schools Network and a Quiet Summer Institute. If your school is interested in joining us, please please contact us at quietschools@quietrev.com. That's quietschools at Quiet Rev.com. We would LOVE to hear from you.

And now's the time where we give you some concrete tips for putting these ideas into action.

SUSAN: Number one: Let your child know that, while you want him to develop the skills to participate comfortably in class whenever he has something to say, you do not expect him to be anyone other than the glorious person he already is.

Number two: Work with your child on different strategies for participating in class. For example, some kids do better when they give themselves a little push to speak up early—to be one of the first students to raise their hand. Then their ideas become a kind of anchor, and the teacher and other students start to refer back to what they said. That can be a huge confidence builder.

But for other kids, it's much easier to wait until they've warmed up. And then they don't feel like everyone's looking at them when they decide to raise their hands.

This is all very specific to each child. The key is to help your child find the way that works best for him or her.

There's also the question of what KIND of participation comes most naturally. Does she like playing devil's advocate? Does he want to be the one who poses the thoughtful questions? Or does your child like to build on other people's ideas, adding their own thoughts? All of these strategies work, but it's important for your child to find out what works best for him or her.

And finally, tip number three: talk with your child about finding the subjects she feels most excited about, and starting to contribute to the class more around THOSE topics.

Maybe it's Minecraft or Harry Potter—no matter what your child loves, it helps to get their feet wet by talking about something that they already know and feel passionate about.

And of course, it always helps to prepare in advance. So when they're doing homework, encourage them to jot down a few things they might want to talk about in class. Then, they'll have those notes right in front of them, just in case they

experience brain freeze at the crucial moment.

I hope these ideas were helpful! That's it for our show today.

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SUSAN: If you're the parent of a quiet child ages 3 to 9 I'm so excited to tell you about a new online course we've created that I really think can change the way you parent your child. The course is beautiful and it includes all kinds of interactive features like, for example, a tool to help you decide when and when not to press your child out of her comfort zone. And scripts for how to advocate for your child with people who say he's too shy. And you'll also have the chance to interact with other parents of quiet kids. To check out the course just visit learn.quietrev.com.

Quiet: The Power of Introverts was produced by Kerrie Hillman in partnership with Andy Bowers and Laura Mayer of Panoply. The episode was edited by Cristy Meiners, and mixed by Jason Gambrell. Our music was composed by Alexis Cuadrado. Special thanks to everyone at Quiet Revolution.

Next week on Quiet: quiet kids and the very loud world of sports. Thanks for listening. I'm Susan Cain.