



HELPING TEACHERS commu

Recently, a school's leadership team visited several classrooms, looking for evidence of expectations for students. One whiteboard displayed a detailed tally system for recording whether students had brought notebooks, completed homework, quickly engaged in learning, and various other items. Everyone agreed that the system efficiently set clear expectations. Tom, one of the teachers, commented, "I should be doing this."

"Should you?" Jane asked. "Or after a week or so, would your students be questioning whether you'd remembered all the tallies?"

He laughed, "You're right. I'd even have trouble keeping track of the marker."

Why wasn't Tom insulted by Jane's questions? Because everyone had a common framework, an essential tool for open conversations about teaching and learning.

A Neutral Language for Teaching and Learning

Usually when teachers observe one another, they think either "I could never master that. His students are so lucky!" or "What an awful way to teach. How boring!" It's hard not to judge yourself—or another teacher—without a common framework that removes judgment by focusing on strengths.

Personality type theory describes normal differences in how people are energized, take in information, make decisions, and approach work and life—all key elements in how people teach and learn. Understanding one another's personality type preferences helps teachers share their instructional strategies and classroom information. Type theory lessens the "culture of silence" (Brookfield, 1986) that discourages teachers from engaging in deep, reflective conversations. Without this kind of framework, teachers often avoid critiquing out of fear of being critiqued.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) was developed by Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers (Myers, 1993). The MBTI helps

Neutral language based on personality type theory helps teachers and administrators talk about the different ways people teach and learn.

nicate

By Jane Kise, Beth Russell, and Carol Shumate

people make constructive use of natural, normal differences:

- **Gaining energy:** Extraversion (energized through action and interactions) or Introversion (energized through reflection and solitude). This natural preference influences a teacher's classroom style.
- **Gathering information:** Sensing (gathering information through the five senses and past experiences) or Intuition (gathering information through hunches, connections, and analogies). Although 70%–75% of the U.S. population prefers Sensing, 82% of the National Merit Scholarships go to Intuitive students (Myers, 1993). This preference pair has a profound impact on what students need for academic achievement.
- **Making decisions:** Thinking (through logic and impartial standards) or Feeling (through values and analyzing the impact on the individuals involved). A majority of principals and superintendents prefer Thinking, but a majority of teachers prefer Feeling, often creating communication difficulties.
- **Approaching life:** Judging (approaching life through planning, emphasizing closure) or Perceiving (approaching life spontaneously, emphasizing staying open to more information).

Teachers who use a framework based on personality type theory think of their colleagues as resources. For example, a teacher may look for a colleague whose style is opposite their own to get suggestions for engaging more students. As one teacher we work with said, "Now that I know [my colleagues'] types, I can better understand why they teach the way they do, or perhaps why their classroom is arranged in a certain manner. I look at the other teachers differently now. Where before I would see someone as old-fashioned or strict, I can now look to their types to try and understand the way they act and why. All of this only leads to better communication if teachers will use their knowledge of type





"I look at the other teachers differently now. Where before I would see someone as old-fashioned or strict, I can now look to their types to try and understand the way they act and why."

accordingly. I can know ahead of time the best way to approach a teacher."

Finding a Framework

You can use another framework as long as it meets the following criteria (Kise, 2006):

- It describes teaching and learning in non-judgmental ways. In the opening example, Tom knew that Jane's comments were prompted by his natural approach to his work, which is more spontaneous than the approach of the teacher who developed the tally system.
- It is based on how each person teaches and learns and doesn't suggest that there are limits to what they can do. The teachers whose natural styles are more like Tom's know that they can set clear expectations but that other methods for setting those expectations match their strengths more effectively than a tally sheet.
- It describes which learning styles a practice will reach. The focus is on student outcomes, rather than teacher behaviors. In the example with Tom and Jane, the focus was on whether expectations were clear, not on which method was "right" or "wrong" in setting those expectations.
- It builds bridges among various staff development efforts. With type as a common language, teachers don't need to master one framework for classroom management, another for differentiation, another for collaboration, and so on. Type concepts add insights in each area.

Any framework that accomplishes so much takes time to learn. To understand why that time is worth the effort, following are some common issues and explanations of how a type framework enables constructive collaboration, rather than defensive reactions.

Do teachers adopt one another's best practices? When teachers presented successful strategies to their peers, we used to hear comments like, "That might work for sixth graders, but not with my eighth graders" or "I'd never use so much class time for something like that." Now we're more likely to hear, "That'd be a stretch for me, but it works, doesn't it?"

Because the type theory framework makes teachers aware of their own instructional blind spots, they are more open to new ideas. For example, teachers' natural preferences drive the kinds of assignments they are comfortable giving. Some prefer more-structured assignments that can be graded objectively and consistently, and others prefer giving choices or open-ended assignments that require subjective grading of varying final projects, a more Intuitive style.

Ellie, who preferred creative assignments, asked Jane for strategies to improve completion rates on reports. Jane showed Ellie's grade-level team a folder system that helped students organize note cards and track progress. Two of the teachers enthusiastically discussed how to use it with students, but Ellie said, "It's too dry, too boring. Who would want to take notes that way?" A colleague with the opposite type preferences said, "I would!"

Ellie was visibly stunned as she realized that some of her students want that kind of structure too. She decided to demonstrate the folder system to her students. A majority used it.

Can teachers collaborate without feeling criticized? Sometimes there's little doubt in an observer's mind that what's going on in a classroom is detrimental to learning. A teacher leader shared how he'd used the language of Extraversion and Introversion to help new teachers with classroom management issues without finding fault. If Extraverted students are asked to be quiet for too long, they'll naturally start to squirm, blurt, or worse. Newer teachers may then try to force even more silence, thinking this will solve the problem. The teacher leader shared his coaching technique, saying "Instead of saying, 'These students are out of control; they need more discipline,' I can now say, 'It seems like the student population of this class is predominately Extraverted. Perhaps the rowdiness of the class can be better dealt with by giving the students more opportunity to work in groups and make presentations in class...an interactive environment where the students can channel their extraverted energy toward productive class work.'"

Teachers find it easier to share lesson plans, too, when the discussion focuses on type. For



"I predict that I would have gotten extremely frustrated and might have judged him as incompetent.... I would not have suspected that I was not giving him advice in a way that was helpful to him."

example, the Intuitive teachers might help the Sensing teachers emphasize the bigger picture earlier in unit plans. A science teacher said, "I was taught Bloom's taxonomy in my education classes. According to the taxonomy, Sensing comes first and should be used to introduce topics and begin developing knowledge. Intuition then comes later.... I had always heard words like 'higher order thinking' or 'critical thinking,' rather than Intuitive. Bloom's would have you start at facts and then move to critical thinking. It was an eye-opening experience to learn that some people learn best in the opposite direction." After developing this understanding, this teacher's grade-level team quickly worked to meet the needs of both types of students.

Can teachers coach one another? Differentiated conversations also involve delivering information in ways that match the learning style of the listener. Hargreaves (1994) found that peer coaching was often more contrived than effective and that mismatches between the beliefs and teaching style of the coach and the teacher being coached were the biggest hindrances to effective implementation.

To help a first-year teacher solve classroom management issues, a teacher mentor had initially offered the new teacher options to consider and choose from, just as the teacher mentor would want. After she learned that his preference was for Sensing, she gave one straightforward suggestion: write out your instructions on a flip chart before class starts to decrease transition time. Then she tailored her coaching to match his learning style: "I explained step by step what should be written. We planned time into his prep period for writing out these instructions and I modeled this strategy for him. I was careful not to talk about too many other strategies. Also, we met after he tried the strategy in his classroom to discuss its effectiveness."

In this sequential way, the new teacher gradually adopted several effective strategies. The mentor confided that without the framework of type, she might have assumed that he was trying to get her to do his work. Instead they partnered well and the teacher's instruc-

tional efforts improved. She said, "I predict that I would have gotten extremely frustrated and might have judged him as incompetent.... I would not have suspected that I was not giving him advice in a way that was helpful to him."

Can teacher leaders disarm resistance before it forms? Do the same teachers seem to resist every initiative or idea? A study of more than 2,000 people (Barger & Kirby, 1995) showed that there were clear differences in the informational needs of people with different personality types, that resistance increases when those needs are not met, and that leaders in general fail to recognize and deal effectively with those needs.

Differentiated conversations let principals review a new strategy, initiative, or expectation that they're setting for teachers and identify varying needs. For example, Beth developed a color-coded graphic organizer to synthesize her school's various initiatives. When she showed it to her leadership team, they pointed out, "You prefer Intuition, so perhaps that's why in your mind this diagram simplifies our strategic plan. You naturally see the connections. However, from a Sensing standpoint, every line item is another detail they're responsible for. It's a nightmare." The team decided that instead of sharing the chart, they'd show relevant portions of it when introducing new strategies to the staff.

Is it easy for staff members to constructively question school leaders? At another school, teachers complained that the principal never gave them the information they needed. The principal said that she asked for feedback in meetings but received silence instead.

To facilitate a differentiated conversation, teachers were separated into groups by type and asked to write down their questions about the next initiative, working with new weather equipment.

The principal and the science coordinator, who were Intuitive and Thinking, had very few questions: What are the possibilities for the equipment? When can we start using it? What training is available? How can students be involved? The Sensing and Feeling teachers, however, generated two dozen questions.

“The basic idea is this: you can’t talk to everyone the same way because people are different. This sounds obvious but I think this notion is often forgotten....”

The principal looked at the list and said, “I can’t possibly anticipate all of these because my mind simply doesn’t work the same way. Please help me by telling me what you need!”

Conclusion

Without taking adequate time to develop the framework, personality type theory—and most other frameworks—may simply become a new method of labeling people as stars or strugglers. But as one Sensing teacher put it, “The basic idea is this: you can’t talk to everyone the same way because people are different. This sounds obvious but I think this notion is often forgotten.... Using the same manner of speaking ensures a failure of communication between the speaker and a significant part of the audience. Learning [about personality] type has not only brought this basic notion of human interacting to the forefront of my consciousness but has also given me language to better articulate the difference in people when evaluating teachers and when talking with teachers about students.” **PL**

REFERENCES

- Barger, N. J., & Kirby, L. K. (1995). *The challenge of change in organizations: Helping employees thrive in the new frontier*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1986). *Understanding and facilitating adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teachers’ work and culture in the postmodern age*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Kise, J. A. G. (2006). *Differentiated coaching: A framework for helping teachers change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Myers, I. B., with Myers, P. B. (1993). *Gifts differing: Understanding personality type*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Jane Kise [jane@earthlink.net] is an education consultant based in Edina, MN. She is a coauthor of *Differentiated School Leadership* (Corwin Press, 2007).

Beth Russell [beth.russell@mpls.k12.mn.us] is the principal of Anwatin Middle School in Minneapolis, MN. She is a coauthor of *Differentiated School Leadership*.

Carol Shumate is an education consultant based in Chapel Hill, NC.

Advertisement