

## **Guide for Busy Teacher Educators: Myers-Briggs for Teachers**

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### **Introduction**

For a number of years, the University of Essex has run Myers-Briggs sessions for general staff as part of its varied programme of Professional Development. However, owing to recent growth in the number of courses aimed specifically at academic staff, the Learning and Teaching Unit has started to run 'purpose built' Myers-Briggs sessions for teachers. After running three of these sessions during the 2005-06 academic year, the experience of Essex – as an institution – has been extremely positive, as evidenced by the immediate and long-term feedback of participating teaching staff.

In the light of this, the following guide offers a user perspective on the usefulness of Myers-Briggs to teacher educators, including: a general introduction to the typology; consideration of some of the benefits of using it, as reported by participating teachers; and, an outline of the 'purpose built' session for use as a template by other institutions.

### **What is Myers-Briggs?**

Myers-Briggs is perhaps the best known professional development tool of its kind. As a conceptual model of psychological types, it is used globally in many varied contexts, but always for the purpose of helping participants to understand themselves and others better, particularly in relation to natural preferences and behaviours. Based on the psychology of Carl Jung (1921), it provides a comprehensive model that is as revealing in the context of teaching and learning as it is in any other professional or commercial environment. It is a process that is illuminating and heartening for anyone who has ever felt misunderstood or infuriated by another person. In short,

'[Myers-Briggs] provides a useful method for understanding people by looking at eight personality preferences that everyone uses at different times. These eight preferences are organised into four opposite pairs. When you take the Indicator, the four preferences (one from each pair you identify as being most like you) are combined into what is called a type.' (Hirsh and Kummerow, 2000:1)

What, then, are the four opposite pairs? They are:

1. Extraversion or introversion: 'extraversion' (which is represented by the initial 'E'), describes a preference for drawing energy from the outside

world of action, while its opposite, 'introversion' (I), describes a preference for drawing energy from the internal world of ideas.

2. Sensing or intuition: 'sensing' (S), describes a preference for processing information via the senses, while its opposite, 'intuition' (N), describes a preference for following a 'sixth sense'.
3. Thinking or feeling: 'thinking' (T), describes a preference for organising information and thoughts in a logical and objective way, while its opposite, 'feeling' (F), describes a preference for making decisions based on personal values.
4. Judging or perceiving: 'judging' (J), describes a preference for living life in a planned, organised way, while its opposite, 'perceiving' (P), describes a preference for being spontaneous.

These definitions are short and superficial, but are enough to give a general picture of the typology (for more comprehensive explanations, see the bibliography at the end of this guide). Once the self-assessment process is complete, participants arrive at a four-letter type, made up of initials; for example, ESTJ represents the combination of extrovert/sensor/thinker/judger.

In total, there are sixteen possible types. While each of the four component parts of a type indicate specific behaviours and mindsets, it is the blend of all four that is most helpful to individuals.

### **What are the benefits of using Myers-Briggs with teachers?**

Although Myers-Briggs is no doubt used by other institutions for the purpose of improving teaching, it is generally less common in this specific context than other similar tools, such as Honey and Mumford (1982) and VAK. Nevertheless, the experience of Essex has been wholly positive, with a wide range of both short-term and long-term benefits reported by participants.

Firstly, before exploring some of these benefits, teaching should be placed in a Myers-Briggs context, which posits that every teacher has a 'best-fit type'. While this is not negative *per se*, if the teacher is unaware of his or her own natural biases and preferences there will be unwanted implications for learners. For example, in a class size of twenty, a teacher might encounter a wholesale mix of all sixteen personality types, fifteen of whom would have alternative learning preferences to their own.

Therefore, a heightened awareness of the range of difference in type will improve the ability of the teacher to engage each individual. Moreover, research has shown that, while all types are represented by teaching staff at all levels, there are one or two types that are more common than others (Lawrence 2000:20-22), though it does not follow that learners have the same distribution.

The following benefits were posited by academic staff who took part in the Myers-Briggs session which ran in June 2006, as part of the University's HEA-accredited CHEP (Certificate in Higher Education Practice) programme:

- It helps teachers identify and address biases in their own learning style and consider how these might adversely affect different 'types':

'[The session] helped me to gain a view of how type might influence the reception of the material we present. It also shed light on my own type.'

- *Ipso facto*, it encourages teachers to provide a varied diet of learning experience:

'I will give more consideration to people's differences and try to be more adaptive.'

'It helped me think about the kind of teaching activities I tend to introduce, and how to balance these so that all of the students are challenged but still feel secure in the classroom.'

- It helps teachers plan and deliver courses so that a broad range of different learners will be engaged:

'[The session] encouraged a lot of thought in planning courses in order to try to appeal to the variety of types. I feel I now know how to better relate to staff (as well as students) – particularly in meetings and departmental work.'

Incidentally, Lawrence (2000:2) recommends that teachers should aim to strike a balance between supporting and challenging learners when planning instruction:

'Any type can become a good teacher. Students also come in all sixteen types. At times, all students need the support of being with a teacher who is like them in type, because understanding comes more easily between types. At times, every student needs the challenge of being with a teacher of a different type. Finding the right balance between support and challenge for students is an important task for those who plan instruction. If a faculty has a mixture of types, and knows about the characteristic strengths of different types, then students can be better served.'

- It helps academic staff appreciate that different approaches to teaching and administration need not be uncomplimentary:

'[The session] made me think hard about how people like to work and learn. It will be useful in meetings, etc., as well as teaching.'

- *Ipso facto*, it helps harmonise colleague relations by explaining differences that might otherwise be interpreted as conflict:

‘It will help working with colleagues – understanding why I get frustrated with things.’

‘It gave me a better perspective on the likely motivations of my colleagues and how I may appear to them.’

Since this session at the end of the Summer term, a number of teaching staff taking the CHEP have commented to the Programme Leader on the lasting impact it has had on their teaching and learning, as evidenced by their teaching during the Autumn term.

There are also a number of other considerations that commend Myers-Briggs to use as a learning and teaching development tool:

- It has a sound methodological basis and is psychometrically robust.
- It takes as its main foundation – and follows in the tradition of – Carl Jung’s ‘Psychological Types’ (1921).
- Its scope is wide and transferable to different contexts and arenas (whereas the VAK model, for example, is mostly concerned with sensory preferences, and the Honey and Mumford model is specific to learning preferences, so does not shed much light on colleague relations).
- It encourages tolerance, perspective, and an appreciation of relativity, all of which have significant academic mileage. Many difficulties we experience with people are the result of approaching things from different angles, but there is nonetheless a temptation to think that our own way is the best or only way. A key message of Myers-Briggs is that ‘different’ means just that – it does not mean ‘wrong’!
- It improves general communication and resolves conflict.
- It enhances personal and/or career development.
- It can identify leadership style.
- It can help explain reactions to change and stress.

### **How can dedicated sessions for teachers be run?**

It is likely that there is a least one person in every higher education institution who is a qualified Myers-Briggs trainer or practitioner, whether they are located in Staff Development, the Careers Service, or the Centre for Business and Management – or institutional equivalents. Where this is the case, they could be asked to run a dedicated session for teachers; where it is not, Myers-Briggs could be used informally and unofficially by a self-taught teacher-educator. Alternatively, a qualified external trainer could be approached.

The following bullet-points outline the full-day session that has been running successfully at Essex, based on a tried and tested one-day programme and developed by Terry Barry, a qualified Myers Briggs practitioner in the University's Learning and Teaching Unit:

- The session starts with an ice-breaker activity that requires participants to discuss, in small groups, the words they generally use to describe people, and what their opposites words are. These lists of words are then compared to Myers-Briggs terminology. The purpose of this activity is to establish at an early stage that type-indicating is not stereotyping, and that there are no negative types. (15 mins)
- The Myers-Briggs model is then fully introduced, including background, history, preferences, and dimensions, via a standard presentation. The four dimensions are covered in turn, and participants engage in activities in order to understand each one and then self-assess their preference before they move on to the next. (80 mins)
- At this point in the day, the results of participants' pre-completed questionnaires are considered, with scores explained. Participants then further examine different 'types', and discuss them with colleagues, in order to arrive at their own 'best-fit' type. (40 mins)
- An hour before lunch, all participants are required to take part in a hands-on group activity. The purpose of the exercise is to explore how type influences the way that participants tackle tasks. (60 mins)
- After lunch, participants immediately take part in an activity to shake off the postprandial lull. They are organised into groups of the same type and are asked to discuss the advice they would give to someone who does not share their preference on how best to communicate with them. (30 mins)
- The next activity involves participants getting into small groups, each with its own set of cards. Some of the cards feature the names of the eight different preferences (i.e. the four sets of opposing pairs), while the rest feature a variety of learning activities. The aim is to match the learning activities to the Myers Briggs preferences; the purpose is for participants to reinforce their understanding of the different types, and to think specifically about how types operate differently as both teachers and learners. (45 mins)
- The second and fourth dimensions of the Myers Briggs (i.e. sensing/intuition and judging/perceiving) are most meaningful in the context of learning and teaching. With this in mind, the last part of the day is spent in 'type-alike' groups (that is, SP, NJ, SJ, and NP groups). The first activity involves discussing some handouts that summarise teaching practices in relation to types. The next activity revisits learning preferences in relation to type. This is followed by discussion about what group members would be prepared to change about their teaching practices. Participants then prepare a lesson plan on a given subject to

teach to the 'opposite type'. The plan is shared with the group having the opposite preferences and feedback is given. (130 mins)

- The programme finishes with a plenary to summarise and evaluate the day.

### **Finding out more about Myers-Briggs in teaching**

Unfortunately, there are only a very limited number of books about Myers-Briggs that focus specifically on learning and teaching. The one preferred at Essex is:

Lawrence, G. (2000) *People Types and Tiger Stripes* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). CAPT: Florida, USA.

### **References**

Hirsh, S. & Kummerow, J. (2000) *Introduction to Type in Organisations* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). OPP: Oxford, UK.

Lawrence, G. (2000) *People Types and Tiger Stripes* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). CAPT: Florida, USA.