

Theory and Applications of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory
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Background to the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory

The history of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) can be traced to 1921 when Carl Jung published his work observing personality preferences. In that work, Jung remarked, "I have long been struck by the fact that besides the many individual differences in human psychology there are also typical differences. Two types especially come clear to me; I have termed them the introverted and the extraverted types" (Jung, 1971, p.3). Jung's work influenced Katharine Cook Briggs as well as her daughter, Isabel Myers. Just as Jung pondered over his differences with his mentor, Sigmund Freud, Isabel Myers was struck by her preferential differences as compared to her husband's (Bayne, 1995). Myers and Briggs' interest in Jung's theories was placed into practice during World War II. During the war, as men left for military duty overseas, women began to enter the workforce performing jobs that had, at that point in time, been the sole domain of men. Myers and Briggs worked on methods that would help women, who heretofore had no prior workplace experience, find those types of jobs that were most comfortable and effective (Myers & Myers, 1996).

Briggs and Myers soon ran into opposition from the academic community. Neither of them were psychologists, nor did either of them hold advanced degrees. They also lacked any formal training in statistical research or test construction. On top of these obstacles, the academic community had not yet accepted Jungian theories. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, other researchers discovered MBTI and dissertations began to explore the theory.

Persons active in this movement were Harold Grant of Auburn University, Cecil Williams of Michigan State University, and Mary McCaulley of the University of Florida (McCaulley, 1990).

Although originally used for one-on-one counseling, Myers-Briggs theories and the MBTI are now applied to team building, organizational development, business management, education, training, and career counseling (Ziff, 2000).

Impact of MBTI on Education and Workplace Training

In order to understand how Myers - Briggs theories have impacted the field of education and workplace training, MBTI should be briefly discussed. Jung had made distinctions in personality preferences or styles between two groups, introverts and extraverts. Myers and Briggs took this as their starting point and proceeded in conceptualizing additional pairs of preferences. A set of four pairs of preferences is the conceptual foundation for sixteen profiles. Through a set of questions that are self-administered in a forced-choice format (McCaulley, 1990), the subject addresses four major questions. The question of where the subject receives their energy (externally or internally) provides the basis of whether they are extroverted (E) or introverted (I). Where the subject gathers their information (by physical senses or by other, internal knowing) provides whether the person relies on their senses (S) or relies on intuition (N). How the subject makes decisions, by thinking (T) or by feeling (F), addresses the third question. Finally, the subject addresses the question of how they orient their life. If it is in a planned orderly way it is termed as making judgments (J). If life orientation is spontaneous, it is termed as perceptions (P) (Kroger & Thuesen, 1992). At the end of the process the subject has an inventory of preferences made up of four types. An example would be an introvert who is intuitive, and feels, but orients his life in and orderly fashion: INFJ.

From this “typing” the subject finds understanding as to the way they prefer to use their mind (McCaulley, 1976). This also provides understanding for others (who are aware of the individual’s inventory) as they interact with the subject. Research in the area of business education indicates that instructors can capture, through observing the behavior of their students, cues about how their students’ minds work (Stitt-Gohdes, 2001). Albert Canfield, whose work was influenced by MBTI concepts noted, “knowing the kinds of learning experiences that students most value may help instructors develop alternative course structures that provide a better fit between their instructional goals and the learning style preferences of their students” (Canfield, 1992, p. 1). It is through these perspectives that MBTI’s influence on education is found. More specific examples of how Myers - Briggs theories have been applied to education can be derived from examining how MBTI types interplay with learning styles, teaching styles, and feedback.

In terms of learning styles, extroverts (E) prefer movement, action, and discussion, while introverts (I) prefer learning activities involving reflection and working individually. Sensing (S) individuals prefer step-by-step learning while intuitive (N) individuals take imaginative leaps with theory and relationships. “Thinking” (T) students look for a sense of accomplishment with their studies while feeling (F) students study topics they care about. Judging (J) individuals prefer structure while perceiving (P) individuals prefer flexible learning environments (Bayne, 1995, p. 125).

“Mismatches between teaching and learning styles are inevitable” (Bayne, 1995, p.127) but instructors can become aware of their own inventories, continue to work from their strengths, while taking the opportunity to address other styles. For example, intuitive (N) instructors (whose strengths are theory and concepts) could include more facts in their lessons.

Being aware of style preferences can balance instructor/trainer to student/worker feedback. Some instructor/trainers praise more than challenge their trainees. Other instructor/trainers challenge students to a higher level of performance more than providing purely positive feedback. Instructor/trainer awareness of their styles can facilitate a balanced approach.

The Author's Experience in Specific Business Case Applications

The discussion now moves to how Myers-Briggs theory applies to workplace situations. To place the discussion into context, there are three arenas in which the author has applied Myers-Briggs theory. The author worked for an insurance company headquartered in Richmond, Virginia, as the corporate ombudsman, providing regulatory and ethical guidance to staff. The author was also an adjunct accounting professor at a local university. Although the author could not formally “type” the colleagues and students with whom the author interacted (this could only be performed by administering the MBTI questionnaire), the author was able to be aware of, and work with their own preferences and strengths, while developing strategies to assure other styles were not ignored. There are also techniques advocated that suggest that style typing can be observed in situations where applying the MBTI questionnaire is not practical (Kroger & Thuesen, 1992). These techniques suggest that from careful observation the author would be able to perceive the styles of others. This being the case, then as an ombudsman, corporate trainer, or adjunct, the author could adjust behavior and interact with others accordingly.

At the insurance company, the author's roles and responsibilities included counseling employees in a confidential setting and conducting corporate ethics awareness training. Being aware of the perceptions of various types helped the author better understand the underlying

issues being raised during private counseling sessions. Knowing that different types receive and understand presented information differently, encouraged the author to incorporate different styles and approaches in corporate ethics presentations.

At the university, the author's interaction with students encompassed a broad range of roles. The author interacted with students as a professor, academic advisor, mentor, or career advisor. The author oriented interviewing and counseling styles to match the individuals who came in for counseling. As an instructor, the author recognized and provided a more meaningful balance between concept and facts in the lesson plans. A balance was found between challenging students during feedback sessions and offering praise for successful efforts.

Resources

Consulting Psychologists Press (CPP, Inc.) is the institution that owns the rights to MBTI. The full inventory is available to selected persons CPP considers adequately credentialed to use the tool as it is intended. Other MBTI-based resources are available to other persons who have a purpose for the theory but do not currently have the required credentials to apply the questionnaire. These resources are in the forms of guides, handbooks, and videos. Some guides contain abbreviated "activity" forms that the subject can self-complete. These tools can be a useful addition to subject observation.

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