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## Cooperative learning and personality types

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## ABSTRACT

We examine whether student personality type helps explain differences in students' course perceptions across sections that varied only in the usage of cooperative learning. We use the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to classify students based on their preferred ways to take in information. We then compare the perceptions of students engaged in cooperative learning with perceptions of students engaged in independent problem-solving for each personality type. Despite the less positive impression of some personality types regarding cooperative learning activities, we find that these activities facilitated increased interaction among certain types of students who might not otherwise interact with classmates.

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## 1. Introduction

Faculty members across a wide range of academic disciplines incorporate cooperative learning exercises into their repertoire of teaching methods. The popularity of this approach can be attributed in part to a substantial body of research that supports a positive role of cooperative learning in improving student achievement and promoting deep learning, as well as evidence indicating that students generally prefer cooperative learning exercises over more passive modes of instruction such as lectures (e.g., see [Johnson et al., 1998b](#); [Slavin, 2011](#); [Yamarik, 2007](#)).

Despite a generally positive appraisal of cooperative learning techniques, educational psychologists suggest that some students will dislike such active learning approaches or perceive them to be ineffective (e.g., see [Bonwell and Eison, 1991](#)). Students who are accustomed to passively listening to lectures may feel uncomfortable participating in active learning exercises since in comparison to lecture-based teaching methods, active learning activities demand increased focus, attention, and effort from students during class sessions. This is certainly the case with cooperative learning activities, which are purposefully structured to elicit participation from all students for the duration of the activity. Perhaps more importantly, cooperative learning requires substantial contact and collaboration with other students regardless of students' comfort level interacting in such a manner or their desire to interact with classmates (at all). Heterogeneity in students' personality types, which influence student's preferred learning processes, could translate into differences in students' preferences regarding cooperative learning activities, their perceptions of interaction levels, and the degree to which their interest is stimulated by different assignments and tasks.

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Understanding the connection between personality type and student perceptions about cooperative learning equips instructors to more effectively communicate the benefits of cooperative learning activities, to anticipate and respond to (positive and negative) responses of students to cooperative learning, and to structure such activities with the needs and preferences of a diverse group of learners in mind. For the greater the intentionality with which instructors adopt and implement active learning pedagogical techniques, the more effective such techniques will be in promoting student achievement, interest and engagement. Despite the benefits of understanding this connection, very little is known about the relationship between personality type and various student outcomes associated with active learning (in any form). The current study uses a quasi-experimental research design to advance our understanding of the impact of cooperative learning approaches across heterogeneous groups of students. Using data from principles of microeconomics courses, we examine whether personality type variation within a class is correlated with differences in student interactions and course perceptions across sections that varied only in the usage of cooperative learning. Our results indicate that students with different personality types viewed the cooperative component of cooperative learning exercises differently. In particular, introvert types and perceiving types regard classes that incorporate cooperative learning as more interactive than other courses, but this does not translate into significant differences in reported satisfaction with the course or the degree to which the environment was conducive to learning. Some personality types (e.g., feeling types) who might be expected to enjoy cooperative activities that entail substantial interaction with classmates were actually less likely to characterize the exercises as contributing to their learning or satisfaction with the course.

## 2. Background information

### 2.1. Personality type and learning

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) classifies individuals based on four aspects of their preferred ways to take in information and use it to draw conclusions. Although other schemes exist for categorizing individuals based on their personality type and/or learning styles, the most widely utilized personality inventory is based on the theory developed by Jung (1923) and extended by Myers (1962). The MBTI affords two advantages for the purposes of this analysis. First, the MBTI is based on cognitive theory that characterizes personality types based on the way that they take in and process information. This strong theoretical foundation provides a context that is especially helpful in trying to understand how changes in the classroom environment and the manner in which information is presented to students affects student outcomes. Second, the MBTI is widely used in economic education research, so – despite the limitations of the MBTI – utilizing this measure facilitates comparisons with existing studies. The four components of personality type (as outlined by Myers, 1995) and the implications of these cognitive preferences for learning are summarized below.

### 2.2. Extroversion–introversion (*E vs. I*)

Although this aspect of the MBTI inventory is frequently believed to distinguish between more and less sociable individuals, in actuality this component of personality type distinguishes between individuals who tend to be more attentive to external or internal aspects of life. Extroverts tend to focus on people, things, and events in their external environment, and are prone to action, understanding life better by experiencing it. They often feel “most energized by the external world” (Fairhurst and Fairhurst, 1995, p. 25). In contrast, introverts tend to focus their perceptions and judgments on their inner thoughts and ideas, aim to understand before acting, give matters careful consideration, and relish the opportunity to spend time in peaceful reflection. In the educational context, extroverts tend to process and clarify new information by talking, enjoying the opportunity to share ideas with others and to receive feedback from peers and instructors as they learn (Fairhurst and Fairhurst, 1995). Introverts, however, find interaction with others more taxing, so may attempt to avoid such interactions. They generally prefer to think through new concepts without interruption and to process information fully before taking the risk of discussing it with peers or instructors (Mamchur, 1996).

### 2.3. Sensing–intuitive (*S vs. N*)

The MBTI also distinguishes between individuals who prefer to take in information by using their senses to comprehend the world around them and those who take in information by relying on intuition. For sensing types, the five senses are the most reliable sources of information. These individuals tend to be especially observant and to focus on the particulars of current experiences. On the other hand, intuitive types are more comfortable with using imagination, attaching meanings to experiences, and focusing more on the inspirations and conclusions that arise from unconscious processes. In the classroom, sensing types prefer to learn facts, tend to focus on details, and are most interested in the practical applications of theory (Fairhurst and Fairhurst, 1995). These students “move cautiously into new learning, prefer a set procedure, and usually learn one step at a time” (Mamchur, 1996; p. 27). In contrast, intuitive type students prefer theoretical abstractions rather than specific details and tend to focus on the big picture (Fairhurst and Fairhurst, 1995). Unlike their sensing counterparts, intuitive learners prefer to speculate before they are given a correct answer and may become bored quickly if information is repeated (Mamchur, 1996).

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