

Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® instrument to connect classroom learning to life skills

When self-awareness and knowledge of personality type is introduced to a school, two things happen: students start to get better results in class, and they get better, more accurate advice about their career ideas.

The staff and faculty at Manchester understand that today's students will face a slew of new challenges as they enter tomorrow's workforce. They aim to utilize the most innovative techniques and most relevant research to give students the skills they need to thrive. Consequently, the school maintains high expectations of its students, and says on its website: at Manchester High School, the MHS stands for "mastering high standards."

In Manchester's career center, career services teacher Mark Danaher, NCC, GCDFI, is charged with helping students determine which careers they want to pursue and identify the academic path that will best enable them to accomplish their goals. As he puts it, the center helps bring students' education to life by infusing 21st-century skills into the classroom.

Business Challenges

- Helping students to get better results
- Delivering accurate, useful career guidance for students
- Identifying what causes students to drop out

Company Profile

Manchester High School of Manchester, Connecticut, United States, is on a mission "to create an environment for all students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to become successful, contributing members of society." It serves around 1,700 students.

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Solution

To accomplish those objectives, Danaher relies on several tools and programs. One of the most interesting and fruitful programs uses the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) assessment to improve the learning experience in English classes by shedding light on how personality shapes thought and behavior. The individual's type can then be used to derive information that directly applies to work and learning habits/inclinations, interpersonal relationships, and other factors affecting education.

The starting point

Danaher has been using the Myers-Briggs assessment with juniors at Manchester High School since 2001. Typically, the process begins when he administers the assessment to students in the school's English classes. Once the results have been generated, he returns to the classroom for a 90-minute discussion, during which he verifies each student's type and explores how it might affect his or her academic interests, choice of colleges, and, ultimately, career. Reaction from students has been very positive, says Danaher. "Students often think they know themselves, but we encourage them to keep an open mind. Usually by the end of our activities they begin to see how Myers-Briggs type-based understanding of themselves and others benefits them in multiple arenas."

The 'A-ha!' moment

Operating with the belief that experiencing a concept is a more powerful learning experience than simply hearing about it, Danaher guides students through exercises designed to enhance their understanding of type. These exercises were taken from *Shape Up Your Program! Tips, Teasers, & Thoughts for Type Trainers*, collected and compiled by Margaret U. Fields and Jean B. Reid.

One exercise involves giving each student a Styrofoam cup and having him or her write about it for one minute. Typically, reports Danaher, a student with a preference for Sensing will describe every physical detail of the cup—from the numbers at the bottom to its color and weight. Intuitive students, on the other hand, may discuss

Solution

- Introduce MBTI assessment to improve performance in class
- Introduce Strong assessment to improve quality of career guidance

“ We use the Strong in conjunction with the Myers-Briggs assessment to help them determine their optimal path.”

Mark Danaher,
NCC, GCDFI, Manchester High School, Connecticut

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how it can be used as a telephone or that you can “hear the ocean” by placing it to your ear. “This serves as an ‘aha!’ moment, showing the kids how differently they tend to focus their attention,” said Danaher. “It’s an interesting process to observe.”

Danaher also guides students through an exercise referred to as the Star and Sailboat, designed to illustrate their preference for either Judging or Perceiving. Students have five minutes to make the best possible star with a limited set of materials. About two minutes into the exercise Danaher announces that he ‘made a mistake’ and that they have only one minute to make the best possible sailboat.

At that point, he says, those with a preference for Judging tend to get flustered and want to finish the star they originally started, often getting stuck. Those with a preference for Perceiving, on the other hand, tend to go with the flow and set to work on the sailboat. This illustrates an important difference between individuals: Some have no problem adjusting to last-minute changes. Others do their best work sticking to a plan.

Additionally, says Danaher, they also examine differences between Thinking and Feeling preferences with an activity in which students line up and are confronted with various hypothetical scenarios. For example, students might be asked to consider a situation in which they have been working together as a group and must turn in a project by a certain deadline. This exercise came from Dr Jane Kise of Minnesota.

Upon the deadline’s arrival, one of the students is absent. If the students are inclined to “let it slide” and give the absent student full credit, they are instructed to move to the left. If, on the other hand, they are inclined not to give the absent student full credit, they are instructed to move to the right. According to Danaher, the left/right division among students typically closely mirrors Myers-Briggs assessment results, with Feeling students more often willing to ‘let it slide’ than are Thinking students. This, he says, serves to validate the results of the Myers-Briggs assessment.

Results

- Improved scores of up to 10 percentage points on writing assignments
- More students hitting deadlines
- Roll-out of type-based professional development to 50 teachers following success of initial trial

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Linking type with writing style

Within the context of an English or history classroom, says Danaher, writing is a constant challenge, with different students exhibiting various strengths and weaknesses. “One student may be detail oriented and great at punctuation but lack overall structure, while another student might get the big picture, have a good flow and conclusion, but not be able to document.”

Danaher and the teachers he works with have observed a type/writing style correlation. For example, ‘off-topic’ writing is commonly exhibited by Intuition types, who may start to wander mentally when they get bored.

Sensing students, on the other hand, tend to focus tightly on the details. One of the program’s main strategies involves pairing students based on balancing opposite preferences, and then having them write papers together. The strategy provides each student with direct experience in making improvements he or she might not normally make, such as linking the introduction and conclusion more concretely to the body of a paper, or paying more attention to punctuation, grammar, and spelling. Students often think they know themselves, but we encourage them to keep an open mind.

Usually by the end of our activities they begin to see how Myers-Briggs type-based understanding of themselves and others benefits them in multiple arenas. “As [their] strengths and weaknesses tend to correlate with Myers-Briggs types, putting students in type-based teams can yield very positive results,” said Danaher. Teachers report that the quality of the papers produced by preference-balanced pairs is consistently higher—preference-balanced pair scores typically range from the high 80s to the low 90s, while individual scores are typically in the low 80s or high 70s.

According to Danaher, students often discover they cannot deliver the kind of writing results on their own that they can as part of a preference-balanced pair. And while they’re not necessarily able immediately to hone their skills to compensate for their weaknesses, they can at least pinpoint where they’re lacking. This gives them a basis for either improving their skills over time or seeing the value of working with others to capitalize on their complementary abilities and preferences. As one student, Bill, put it: “[The

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Myers-Briggs program] helped me realize what I should work on, and I tried to build my skills in those areas.”

Meeting deadlines

The program’s evolution has been shaped to a degree by the experiences of the English teachers who have implemented it in their classes. Some teachers, says Danaher, develop new theories and techniques based on their experiences with the Myers-Briggs assessment.

English teacher Debi Weinberg, for example, used preference-balanced pairing to examine its effect on punctuality and completion rates for research assignments. She began by first allowing students to pair up with a partner of their own choosing. The next time, however, she paired students by balancing Myers-Briggs preferences, as well as using her own observations about how they might balance each other’s strengths and weaknesses. This had a dramatic effect on the students’ ability to meet deadlines. According to her analysis, pairs balanced by preference completed their papers on time approximately 77% of the time, well ahead of the 65% of students working solo.


At the end of the research project, students completed an anonymous survey about the process. 45% reported that the partnership benefited their ability to complete the process (12% reported that it did not help them, and the remainder said “I don’t know”). Of those who reported benefits, the common reason cited was the balance of weaknesses and strengths offered by the partnership.

Results

Discussion and knowledge of type preferences does not end with these classroom exercises and activities. On the contrary, the knowledge gained during these sessions gives teachers a foundation for tailoring their tactics to the needs of their students. As part of the program, Danaher gives each teacher a class list indicating the four-letter type of each student as well as ongoing information about how they can leverage type in their instruction to bring the best out of the students.

Beyond the activities Danaher initiates, many teachers continue to use knowledge of personality type to shape their activities, curricula, and student

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interaction. For example, Weinberg's very first activity with each new class is for them to take the Myers-Briggs assessment. The process enables Danaher to learn about the students and to give the teacher advice on how to work more effectively with them to deliver a much more targeted and successful learning experience.

Weinberg also has her students write a self-analytical anecdotal essay at the beginning of each school year. This exercise, in combination with the Myers-Briggs assessment results, provides a "window" into each student's life and personality. It enables her to better understand and meet the student's needs early in the educational process. She then takes it a step further by disclosing to students her own Myers-Briggs type and explaining what that might mean within the classroom context.

Additionally, she often asks students to pair with classmates with at least two type preferences different from their own as they tackle essays and other projects—a strategy she says yields noticeably improved results. "I am very appreciative of the availability of the Myers-Briggs assessment," said Weinberg. "It gives me a way to identify potential roadblocks that my students may encounter and quickly determine what we will need to work on throughout the school year."

From classroom to boardroom—connecting the dots

After earning a bachelor's degree in economics, Danaher became certified to teach business, history, and marketing. Prior to teaching, he did a stint in accounting, which he describes as "not a good match" for him personally, but which provided the wake-up call that prompted him to enter the teaching profession. However, his position at Manchester allows him to use a combination of both his teaching and business skills.

"My business experience taught me that if you don't show students how their learning directly applies outside of the classroom, it doesn't stick," said Danaher. "One of the most important goals of this program, therefore, is to show the students how what they're learning will benefit them moving forward."

According to Danaher, much of the impetus behind his work on this program stems from his own high school experience. "There was no counselor to help

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us understand our potential or our options,” he explained. “Consequently, in college I floated four different majors. My goal with this program is to help students draw a meaningful connection between their classroom education and the real world.”

His intent in using the Myers-Briggs assessment is to help students understand all the opportunities available to them in life and make the most informed decisions possible regarding their future. He works to ensure that students understand how skills developed in English class can be applied to the outside world and encourages teachers to “push the envelope” and continue to develop innovative Myers-Briggs applications.

Adding Strong for a complete picture


Danaher emphasizes that personality is only part of who students are. Incorporating the Strong Interest Inventory[®] (Strong) assessment with an understanding of interests, values, aptitudes, and skills, however, provides a fuller picture. Danaher has been using the Strong Profile, College Edition, in conjunction with the Myers-Briggs tool for about two years to help seniors determine their college and career paths. “I meet with students one-on-one to review their Strong results and discuss how their interests relate to various careers and college majors,” said Danaher. “We use the Strong in conjunction with the Myers-Briggs assessment to help them determine their optimal path.”

Benefits beyond work or education

Danaher makes a point of helping students understand that Myers-Briggs assessment applications encompass all aspects of life and discusses with them how understanding personality type can improve their social life. “I explain, for example, that some types prefer to have everything planned, while others are more ‘seat of the pants,’” said Danaher. “This is a common source of frustration among peers.”

Likewise, some relationships experience friction because one person tends to “tell it like it is,” while the other beats around the bush and avoids direct confrontation. Using the Myers-Briggs assessment, he helps students understand how people of different personality types tend to approach situations differently and provides tips on how they can improve communication and avoid the kinds of misunderstandings that strain

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friendships. Not surprisingly, he says, students quickly see the value in this kind of information. As one student, Alex, stated, “The Myers-Briggs assessment helped me realize that I am more introverted than I thought and has allowed me to change my style and engagement in social situations.”

This begs the question of whether improvement in the social arena leads to improvement in educational and career performance. While there may not be a quantifiable answer, Danaher continually reminds students that this information will be useful in all aspects of their life—socially, in college, and, of course, in the business world, where relationships and teamwork are key to success. Perhaps the overall life benefits of training based on the Myers-Briggs assessment are best summed up by student Gabriela, who stated: “Because of my knowledge of myself and my personality type, I am now more calm and relaxed in situations that would usually stress me out.”

Moving forward

Danaher has now secured approval to conduct type-based professional development with all the teachers at Manchester. The optional training will help them understand how they can leverage understanding of Myers-Briggs personality type to improve their interaction with students. 50 teachers are participating in the program. The first workshop was attended by teachers from the Music, English, Physical Education, and Science departments. “This program will benefit all teachers and all classes—not just English,” said Danaher. “Our goal is to make it available to everyone.”

Danaher and his colleagues are currently in the process of gathering data indicating a potential correlation between high school dropout rates, college performance, and type preference. “We’re looking at the type preferences most likely to drop out [using data from the MBTI® Manual] to see if there’s a correlation with college performance,” said Danaher.

“We want to be able to identify students that might be prone to trouble and prepare them to meet those challenges.”

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Conclusion

Using the Myers-Briggs assessment, Mark Danaher is helping Manchester High School accomplish its stated goal of providing “a curriculum, learning, and assessment [that] are purposefully connected to the world beyond the classroom.”

By applying type-based principles in class, Danaher and the teachers have observed improvements by as much as 10 percentage points in writing assignments as well as other aspects of performance, such as meeting deadlines. Knowledge of personality type gained through use of the Myers-Briggs assessment has also enabled teachers to more fully understand their students and pinpoint potential problems, empowering them to provide an educational experience tailored to the needs of each class.

Additionally, when used in conjunction with other tools, such as the Strong Interest Inventory assessment, this information provides an excellent foundation for Danaher’s career and academic counseling. By connecting principles based on Myers-Briggs type to areas close to students’ hearts, Danaher helps them directly connect what they learn in the classroom to life outside school.

All of this, he says, creates a complete educational experience in which students emerge with the ability to connect knowledge of self to knowledge of the world. “By giving students a more complete understanding of who they are, we’re empowering them to make better life decisions,” explained Danaher. “If you understand and remain true to yourself, you’ll have a tremendous advantage as you work toward your goals.”



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