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Understanding Dependency and Passivity: Reactive Behavior Patterns in Writing Centers

Beth Rapp Young and Emily Dziuban

Writing centers pride themselves on offering individualized services that empower students to improve their own writing. In order to do this, we educate ourselves about different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, different learning abilities and disabilities, different audiences. But two kinds of writers continue to perplex us: writers who seem to want our approval more than our feedback, and writers who refuse to do all but the bare minimum (preferring, instead, for us to do their work for them).

Writing center scholars have described these students differently. Jeff Brooks, in his oft-cited essay “Minimalist Tutoring,” considers these writers to be deliberately uncooperative:

There are many students who fight a non-editing tutor all the way. They know you know how to fix their paper, and that is what they came to have done. Some find ingenious ways of forcing you into the role of editor: some withdraw from the paper, leaving it in front of you; some refuse to write anything down until you tell them word for word what to write; others will keep asking you questions (“What should I do here? Is this part ok?”). Don’t underestimate the abilities of these students; they will fatigue you into submission if they can. (4)

Michael Pemberton views dependency as a problem the Writing Center is supposed to solve by fostering “in-dependency” (3). Dave Healy counters that students who seem to rely too much on the Writing Center may simply believe, as we do, that feedback is helpful for writers. Sharyn Lowenstein

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suggests that, given the difficulty of pinpointing which students are inordinately dependent or passive, we should turn our efforts instead to defining what constitutes “misuse” of the Writing Center.

Insights into these perennially puzzling writers can be provided by Long Reactive Behavior Types, a system of cognitive styles. Cognitive styles are not the same as abilities; rather, they are the preferred means of using the abilities one possesses. This particular system was designed by William A. Long, a physician at the University of Mississippi Medical School, where it is taught to physicians to help them work with adolescent patients. Charles D. Dziuban, an educational researcher at the University of Central Florida (UCF), developed a survey instrument to apply Long’s theory to educational settings. The Writing Center and other student services at UCF, along with UCF programs such as Distributed Learning, have used this theory for training and assessment. In addition, this system has been used by the Writing Center at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK) for tutor training.

Cognitive styles have long been used by writing centers and other educators in order to help them understand different needs of students and develop techniques designed to meet these needs. Cognitive styles can also give educators insight into their own preferred means of communicating, and they can help us critically examine what we do as we teach. In this article, we will briefly summarize cognitive styles research and how it applies to writing centers. Next, we will introduce Long Reactive Behavior Patterns and discuss how they are reflected in writer and writing consultant behaviors. We will then review the results of several empirical studies that examine how Long patterns illuminate writing center practices at two large Southeastern public universities. Finally, we will suggest strategies for working with different types of writers in a writing center.

**Overview of Cognitive Styles**

While a complete review of the literature in this area is beyond the scope of this article (Robert J. Sternberg’s *Thinking Styles* provides a more thorough overview), the following is a brief description of approaches to cognitive styles and how writing centers have used these approaches (we have used categories outlined by Sternberg and Grigorenko):

*Cognition-centered* styles are usually measured by tests of maximal performance which have “right” and “wrong” answers. For example, the Matching Familiar Figures Test requires people to select from several alternatives the picture that exactly matches an example picture. The test-taker’s error rate and time to test completion are measured. Those who complete the test more quickly than most, but who make more errors, are considered more “impulsive,” while those who spend more time on the
test but make fewer errors are “reflective.” Sometimes it can be difficult
to distinguish cognition-centered styles from abilities; and, in fact, these
tests are sometimes used to give qualitative assessments of abilities (as
opposed to quantitative assessments, such as IQ). These styles are not
generally used in writing centers.

**Personality-centered** styles include systems such as the Meyers-
Briggs Types Inventory (MBTI), Gregorc Style Delineator, and VARK
Inventory. These styles are usually measured by tests of typical perfor-
mance which do not have “right” and “wrong” answers. For example,
Fleming and Mills’ VARK inventory\(^2\) asks multiple choice questions,
such as “You are not sure whether a word should be spelled ‘dependent’
or ‘dependant’. Do you: a. look it up in the dictionary, b. see the word in
your mind and choose by the way it looks, c. sound it out in your mind,
d. write both versions down on paper and choose one?” Based on answers
to these questions, students are considered to have visual, aural, read/
write, kinesthetic, or mixed preferences for learning new information.
Not all people learn alike, so these styles can help writing centers
understand different learning preferences and design different strategies
for working with writers who hold these preferences. Eric Hobson and
others have noted that shifting student demographics cause writing
centers to encounter a more diverse group of students, making a broad
repertoire of tutoring strategies especially important. Also, as Thomas C.
Thompson points out, personality-centered styles can help tutors “under-
stand individual preferences for certain tutoring styles over others and
perhaps to recognize biases that might otherwise go unnoticed” (136).
Because personality-centered styles focus on individual learning prefer-
ences without assigning value judgments—no preference is more “cor-
rect” than another—writing centers have found them to be extremely
useful.

**Activity-centered** styles fall somewhere between the first two
approaches. Sternberg and Grigorenko describe these styles as “media-
tors of various forms of activities that may arise from aspects of cognition
and personality” (705). Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory and Long’s
Reactive Behavior Types are both included in this category. For example,
the Long Types describe behaviors, recognizing that the behaviors are
mediated by personality and other factors (such as intellect and educa-
tion). To date, Sternberg and Grigorenko note, activity-centered ap-
proaches have received less validation than the other two approaches.
However, because activity-centered styles focus on behaviors that are
directly observable, they may be easier for educators to use.

Cognitive styles have been criticized on several points. Style
constructs have received only mixed support from empirical research
(Sternberg). Sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish styles from
abilities—especially when one style is considered to be better than
another—or from traits, which are generally assumed not to change. Furthermore, the various style typologies tend to be dichotomous, placing people in reductionist, either/or categories. Although theorists recognize that people are far more complex than this, in practice, these typologies can be hard to integrate into a more holistic understanding. Because of this, critics charge that cognitive styles focus too much on “labeling” people rather than helping them.

Although cognitive styles have been criticized, by providing another lens through which to view interpersonal behaviors, cognitive styles can help writing centers understand and improve their own practices.

**Description of Long Reactive Behavior Patterns**

Long’s Reactive Behavior Patterns offer several advantages to writing centers over other style typologies. The Long-Dziuban survey instrument is extremely easy to use (students read a few lists of descriptive phrases and check the ones that most closely fit them) and it is currently available free of charge. The system of types is fairly simple to understand; students can adopt one of four types and exhibit any combination of four traits. Identifying oneself among the typology is as simple as reading the four lists and choosing the one that most accurately reflects frequent behavior patterns. While this system has not been as heavily researched as others, such as the MBTI, available research suggests support for its reliability and validity (Cioffi, Dziuban and Kysilka, Wiens). No special training is required to use the survey instrument, and once people are familiar with the different behavior types, they can usefully employ different strategies simply by observing behavior, without testing or labeling anyone.

The foundational concept of Long’s theory is ambivalence, “the coexistent state of continuing dependency on parent or another authority and a developing need for independence from that relationship” (Long “Practitioner” 87). In terms of the college experience, student writers often feel ambivalence when they enter a Writing Center for the first time. They worry that coming to the Writing Center makes them appear incompetent, unable to write on their own, yet they do not feel comfortable writing their papers entirely on their own either. They want the benefit of whatever expert help they can get, but they do not want to appear too eager to accept that help lest they seem needy or weak. Their ambivalence leads to contradictory yet common behaviors such as writers asking for advice only to argue with whatever suggestions they receive, or writers saying, “It’s not very good yet, but...” only to be personally offended when their writing receives anything but praise. These behaviors are not limited to
college student writers, of course. Long, a pediatrician, believes that the presence of ambivalence, not chronological age or physical maturity, is the defining feature of adolescence, as the boundaries of adolescence have not been clearly outlined ("Adolescent Maturation"). While the adolescent years, no matter when they occur in our lives, contain our most intense expressions of ambivalence, we never become completely independent of authority or remain completely dependent. Therefore, each of us continues to express ambivalence, perhaps on a smaller scale, throughout our lives. Certainly, many of us recognize our own ambivalent feelings about sharing our writing with others. Likewise, even college students who are past their primary adolescent years still have to negotiate between states of dependency and independency. Other college students face more complex challenges as they enter college in the midst of their adolescence, handling instruction from parents and teachers and new-found freedom.

People expressing ambivalence are located by Long's theory along two axes: "aggressive" to "passive" and "independent" to "dependent." Aggressive people exhibit high psychological energy levels, while passive people function on low psychological energy. Independent people do not require approval from authority figures, while dependent people actively seek it. These two concepts, in conjunction with ancillary traits (phobic, hysterical, obsessive/compulsive, and impulsive), help explain students' different behavior patterns.

Before detailing the implications of the various types and traits, a discussion of terminology is in order. The labels used for the types do sound unfortunately medical, even pathological, to those of us who are not medical clinicians. But Long’s theory does not describe pathology. All of these behaviors are normal, and people function quite well with them. As educators, we might prefer that less loaded terms be used; in fact, every time this theory has been presented at writing center conferences, listeners have remarked on the negative connotations of the terms. However, as Charles D. Dziuban and Judith I. Dziuban have noted, “Although these labels sound pathological, Long’s intent is to desensitize readers and emphasize that each one of his types has many positive qualities, qualities which serve them well in adulthood” ("Adolescence" 3). Because the underlying concepts are useful to those of us who work closely with young adults, we believe it is worthwhile to investigate applications for writing centers, whether or not we like the labels Long has chosen.

Long's system identifies four "types" and four "traits." A person primarily belongs to one type, though the same person can occasionally exhibit behaviors from all of the types. Additionally, a person can reflect any combination of traits, from all to none. It is important to remember that, despite how these descriptions are worded, they are meant to reflect behaviors and not biologically ingrained personality differences.
The types fall into one of four quadrants (see Figure 1). None of the quadrants is "better" or "worse" than any other, but people in each quadrant will exhibit different behaviors. The "aggressive/passive" axis indicates how much self-motivated energy the person exhibits: people who are aggressive tend to be self-starters, and they work hard, while people who are passive tend to have less energy and they work less hard. It is important to note that passives are not lazy: they are simply not likely to work for the sake of working; they need to be convinced that the reward will be worth the effort. The "independent/dependent" axis indicates how much the person desires approval from others. Independents have a low need for outside approval, while dependents have a high need for outside approval, and will actively seek that approval. Again, no value judgments are associated with independence or dependence; each end of the scale is no "better" or "worse" than the other.

**Figure 1:**

![Figure 1](image)

In the following paragraphs the four basic types are described.

**Aggressive Independent (AI)**

The AI student has lots of energy and does not expend it seeking approval from others. Often acting first and thinking later, AIs impulsively say or do whatever is on their minds. They have no fear of rejection or reprisal and, therefore, do not feel the need to place internal controls on their behavior. AIs are challenging, in-your-face, tell-it-like-it-is people. They prefer to settle disputes and ambiguities with confrontation.
Aggressive Dependent (AD)

AD students, like AIs, have very high energy levels. But as a result of their desire for outside approval, ADs channel that energy into productive tasks geared to win that approval. These students fill honors classes, athletic programs, student governments, and professional and graduate schools; they are the classic “overachievers.” However, ADs’ need for approval often causes anxiety and frustration, as the ultimate level of achievement can never be reached. ADs put continual pressure on themselves to “do better” no matter what they accomplish. In groups, they spend a great deal of time maintaining good relationships between group members in an attempt to avoid confrontations.

Passive Dependent (PD)

This type is characterized by low energy levels and a high need for approval. While these students are extremely compliant and will do almost anything to receive approval from authority figures, they often refuse to do any more than required for fear of jeopardizing that approval. PDs are the writers who will resist suggestions about how to make their writing more creative, or more personal, because they do not want to take risks. If they think their teacher wants the thesis to be the last sentence of the first paragraph, for example, these students will not move it to the beginning of the second paragraph. If the teacher has assigned a 1000-word essay, they will not feel comfortable writing 1025 words.

Passive Independent (PI)

These students, with both low energy levels and a low need for approval, can present particularly difficult challenges. Often mistakenly identified as stubborn or lazy, PI students do not engage with their classes or writing consultants. They appear non-responsive and withdraw even further when pushed. PIs often perceive advice as nagging, deadlines as eternally flexible, and authority figures as best dealt with by means of subtle resistance.

While PIs are as likely as any type to possess superior intellectual capabilities, they are the least likely type to succeed in college (Dziuban and Dziuban “Reactive Behavior Patterns”). Their preferred methods of expressing ambivalence—minimal work and minimal concern about evaluations of them—are not behaviors which most institu-
tions of higher learning reward. In fact, PIs are likely to come to the Writing Center only when forced to do so (by course requirement or by the need for extra credit), and they may not be particularly responsive during a consultation, instead appearing either bored or withdrawn. Because these students are most at risk of dropping out, when they do come to the Writing Center, it is crucial to work with them effectively.

Various ancillary traits can color these four primary types. No matter what their primary type, writers may exhibit any of these traits to varying degrees. For example, a writer might be slightly phobic, usually impulsive, and not at all hysteric. Possible combinations of types and traits are as limitless as students. It is important to remember that, despite the pathological sounding names of the traits, all of them are normal, and none of them is negative. At the same time, people who exhibit these traits to an extreme degree may benefit from different types of attention.

Impulsive

An impulsive person is unpredictable, often rushing into situations without much advance planning—someone who “goes with the flow.” Impulsive students may find themselves in academic trouble as they decide at the last minute to skip class or go to a party instead of finishing homework. Those students who are independent (Alts or PIs) are naturally impulsive, and the addition of this trait, especially in Alts, may create a student in great need of external controls. Dependent students with this trait may find it easier to overcome the sometimes too-strict controls they have placed on themselves.

An impulsive writer may be perfectly comfortable drafting without an outline, sometimes grabbing a thesis and writing about it without carefully considering its ramifications. This trait can free writers to discover new insights that would not emerge from more methodical drafting, making their papers more interesting. On the negative side, this trait can lead writers to seize the first idea that comes to mind, without considering whether or not it is appropriate to the writing task.

Phobic

Well-focused yet unrealistic fears cause phobic people to spend time planning and worrying before acting. In the Writing Center, a phobic writer may pepper the consultant with questions such as the following: “What if I can’t find any sources at the library?” and “What if my teacher doesn’t like this idea?” The trait can be positive if the “what if” questions help the writer figure out a good plan of action—Alt writers, in particular,
can be helped by this trait. The trait can be negative if the writer is so paralyzed by “what if” questions that he or she cannot get anything accomplished. PD writers, for example, may so torment themselves by asking, “What if the writing consultants think my paper is bad?,” “What if I look like I don’t know what I’m doing?,” “What if I learn that I really can’t write?” Thus tormented, PD writers cannot bring themselves to come to the Writing Center at all.

**Obsessive-compulsive**

Obsessive-compulsive students are highly methodical, organized and planned. This trait is often beneficial because it produces the discipline necessary for good study habits. However, students with this trait can be tempted to turn discipline into ritual, spending so much time on list-making and notebook-arranging that they become less rather than more efficient. For example, an obsessive-compulsive writer might insist on working from an elaborate outline, not so much because the outline helps her organize her thoughts, but because the act of typing it has become a necessary ritual. When she faces a short deadline, this practice can hinder her more than it helps.

**Hysteric**

Hysteric students thrive on crisis and high drama. They either love or hate their writing classes, and they believe their teachers have similarly strong love or hate feelings about them. These students also exhibit exaggerated reactions to grades: we see them in the Writing Center loudly whooping over a good grade and sobbing over a bad one. As with all traits, the hysteric trait can be positive or negative. Their sense of drama may help writers produce lively, interesting texts; but they may become so stressed by the *crisis du jour* that writing becomes impossible.

Again, all of these traits are normal, and most of us function quite well with them. So there is no need for a writing consultant to do anything particular about them, unless they interfere with the writer’s ability to produce an effective text. If writers demonstrate the negative aspects of these traits, Writing Center workers can help the writer balance those effects by providing an alternate perspective. For example, a writer who is blocked by “what if” issues can be encouraged to experiment, while a writer who has impulsively grabbed an unworkable thesis can be asked questions which encourage reflection about the strengths and weaknesses of that thesis.
Most Frequent Reactive Behavior Patterns in Writing Centers

In our study, we sought to identify what types of writers typically use writing centers at two Southeastern public universities. Our hypothesis was that writing center writers would represent different types, and a wider variety of types, than writing center consultants.

Data were collected anonymously at the writing centers of two large Southeastern public universities, where writers volunteered to complete a survey that contained brief demographic questions and the Long-Dziuban Reactive Behavior Survey. Data collection at both universities emphasized voluntary participation (writers were informed about the study but not pressured to participate), flexibility (writers were free to complete surveys, or not, at their leisure while in the Writing Center), and anonymity (writers discreetly placed completed surveys in a box or envelope set aside for this purpose; no one checked to see who submitted surveys, and there was no way of connecting the survey to the individual writer).

Initially, writers were simply told about the study but not individually encouraged to participate. With this method, survey completion rates averaged 18% (N=353). Because we were concerned about the generalizability of this sample to all Writing Center clients, the data collection strategy was changed. During the following semester, data were collected in two different ways. For the first month, data were collected at one university the same way as before—voluntary, anonymous questionnaires. Then, for one week, consultants made a special effort to politely ask every writer they worked with to fill out a checklist. Survey completion could not be required, of course, but we did get many more responses from individual requests. The survey completion rate was 89% during the week individual requests were made.

In order to make sure that data from these different collection strategies could be combined, a two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to evaluate whether proportions of writer types varied significantly when different data collection methods were used. The two variables were data collection strategy with four levels (casual collection at university one during fall, casual collection at university two during fall, casual collection at university one during spring, and intense collection at university one during spring) and Long type with four levels (AI, PI, AD, PD). No significant difference between data collection methods was found ($X^2 (3) = 2.59, p = .46, Cramér's V = .068$). The proportion of writer types was found to be consistent no matter which data collection method was used, so the data were combined for subsequent analyses (N=558). (See figures 2 and 3.)
Reactive Behavior Patterns in Writing Centers

Figure 2: Long Types of Writers

Figure 3: Long Traits of Writers

Note: Totals do not equal 100% because writers can exhibit more than one trait.
Consultants also completed the Long-Dziuban survey on a voluntary, anonymous basis. Two consultants answered some questions but not others; these surveys were omitted from the sample. Of 46 consultants who were asked to complete the survey, 36 did so, for a return rate of 78%. The most common writer type was Aggressive Dependent (AD, 49.1% to 60.6%); the other types (Passive Dependent (PD, 8.3% to 16.1%), Aggressive Independent (AI, 13.7% to 21.3%), and Passive Independent (PI, 13.1% to 19.3%)) were much less common. Writer traits were more variable. For all writers, the most common trait was impulsive (40.4%), closely followed by phobic (39%), obsessive-compulsive (37.4%) and hysterical (29.7%). The most common consultant type was Aggressive Dependent (64%), and the most common consultant traits were phobic and obsessive-compulsive (both 60%).

When consultant type was compared to writer type, a two-way contingency table analysis determined that the proportions of types represented in each group did not differ significantly from each other ($X^2 (3) = 1.854, p = .603$, Cramér's $V = .056$). For both groups, the most common type was Aggressive Dependent (see Figure 4). These findings are good news for writing centers because they suggest that writing consultants prefer to behave in ways similar to writers. Of course, since not all writing consultants and writers represented the same type, writing consultants still need to take care not to misunderstand writers’ preferred ways of doing things when they differ.

Figure 4: Long Types of Writers and Consultants
If consultants do, in fact, represent types that do well in writing classes, these results suggest that writing centers are well situated to help students who will succeed in writing classes. But do these types indeed do well? Our next study set out to discover which types performed best in the first-year composition (fyc) course, a course for which students commonly use the Writing Center.

**Reactive Behavior Pattern Correlations with FYC Grades**

Because writing consultants tend to be good writers who earn high grades in writing-intensive classes, we hypothesized that students of the type most common to consultants, Aggressive Dependent (AD), would earn better grades in their fyc courses.

Data were collected at one large Southeastern public university, where students enrolled in the first of a two-course fyc sequence were asked to complete the Long-Dziuban survey at the beginning and end of the semester. Surveys were distributed during a weekly session attended by all students in all sections (this time was generally scheduled for various guest speakers who introduced these students to resources available at the university). In order to match participants’ Long patterns with their course grades, these surveys could not be completed anonymously. However, as is common with this sort of research, students were informed in advance of the risks and benefits of study participation, and reassured that they could refuse to participate or withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. Additionally, correlations were not calculated until after the end of the semester, after all data had been matched and identifying information removed.

A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the mean grades of each type. None of the means varied significantly from each other (F(3,44) = 1.432, p = .246). Additionally, the participation rate was very low (8.5%). Although the differences in means were not statistically significant, these differences are interesting because they did not follow the trend expected in the hypothesis. Most writing consultants were Aggressive Dependents, yet ADs received grades in the middle of the range (M = 3.2, SD = .75). Passive Dependents received the highest grades of the sample (M = 3.4, SD = .55), while the independent types (both Aggressive and Passive Independents) received the lowest grades (AI: M = 3, SD = .82, PI: M = 2.5, SD = .58).

Because there is a 25% likelihood that these differences were the result of chance, no firm conclusions can be drawn based on the data. However, these results suggest potentially fruitful areas for future research. If passive types earn higher grades in first-year composition, perhaps this means that first-year students are not rewarded for being
action-oriented, willing to go above and beyond the minimum require-
ments. Perhaps they are more likely to be rewarded for compliance, for
following instructions to the letter. Would this hold true for upperclass-
men, too? We suspect not, based on the fact that writing consultants are
all successful students, and many of them are aggressive types, but the
question is worth further consideration. If dependent, approval-seeking
behaviors are rewarded with higher grades, and therefore advancement
towards a degree, should we be encouraging these behaviors in the writing
center, rather than focusing on learning for its own sake? Should we spend
more time helping writers figure out what their teachers want to hear, and
less time helping them figure out what they want to say? Or, given that
dependent types are more likely to use writing centers, do our standard
practices work well to help these students avoid the negative conse-
quences of their preferred behaviors, while failing to help the indepen-
dents who are more at risk?

Of course, absent further research, these questions can only be
speculative. Final course grades reflect a great many things besides
writing quality, including such rule-governed (and important) behaviors
as attendance, meeting deadlines, and so forth, so the findings of the last
study perhaps do not reflect much about students' writing. However, this
study does demonstrate one way in which Long's theory can help give a
new perspective on what we do.

Using Long Reactive Behavior Patterns in Writing Centers

Long's system gives insight into why students behave the way
they do, and suggests ways that writing consultants can effectively
respond to these behaviors. Below are strategies for working with students
in writing centers. Once consultants learn to recognize certain behavior
patterns, especially in students with whom they work over an extended
period of time, they can employ these strategies to create even more
effective sessions.

Working with Aggressive Independents

As writers, AIs keep writing consultants on their toes. They can be
skeptical of authority, and they are not shy about arguing with suggestions
they believe are silly or incorrect. Their energy and impulsivity may lead to
jumbled drafts, with ideas springing in all directions, so they are likely to
need help controlling the ideas in the paper. But it is not necessary to "butter
up" these students with praise about the strengths of their papers before
discussing weaknesses. Finessing AIs will not make them easier to work
with. In fact, if they recognize that praise is an attempt to make them feel better (rather than sincere praise), they may become confrontational.

So when working with writers who behave in these ways, it is best to be honest and direct—consultants should tell them exactly what they think, even at the risk of being a little too direct. If an AI starts proposing a completely tangential topic in the middle of a consultation (“Maybe I should start all over and write about the French Revolution”), a consultant should set clear limits with a response like, “No, that topic is very broad and your paper is due in five hours. You’ll be better off if you focus and rework this topic.”

Working with Aggressive Dependents

In the Writing Center, ADs are likely to seek approval for the way they behave during consultations as well as for their writing. These are the writers who say, “If you think it’s all right, then I feel better,” and their consultants return to the front desk to recount the story of what happened during the session, asking their colleagues, “Do you think it went okay?”

AD writers will take writing consultant feedback to heart, maybe too much to heart. Aggressive dependents tend to “apologize for mistakes and often [get] sad rather than angry when confronted” (Dziuban and Kysilka 6). They will be the writers who want to write a “perfect” paper, and who will maintain “ownership” of the paper as they work towards this goal. ADs often come to the Writing Center with a complete draft that their instructor has already reviewed and they “just want another opinion on.” Grades are extremely important to these individuals so they may expect writing consultants to make sure the paper is grammatically perfect, or to answer the question: “Would you give it an A?” Unfortunately, ADs are more likely to consider graded papers as “dead papers,” because the grade (as opposed to learning) is so important to them. Writing consultants can help them understand that a bad grade on a paper does not necessarily mean they are “bad” students.

Also, since ADs often become workaholics in their quest for perfection, writing consultants should be careful not to overload them with suggestions. Calling attention to too many problems at once may result in a frustrated writer staying up all night trying to make everything exactly right. Consultants should try to focus on larger issues such as logic, organization, and clarity, which can be addressed over time, and to de-emphasize technical issues, as ADs may get lost as they force themselves to memorize and follow all the rules. Writing consultants can, again, help ADs understand that it is okay to be experimental, even playful, with their writing, and that mistakes are part of the learning process.
Working with Passive Dependents

PDs who come to the Writing Center are likely to ask consultants to help them figure out "what the teacher wants," and they will try to write just exactly that. They may request complete, detailed instructions for improving their papers, even exact wording, asking "Can you repeat that?" as they copy consultant words into their draft. They will probably defer to the consultant’s judgment, following all suggestions without question. PDs will not worry about losing "ownership" of the paper if it means they will get a good grade in the end. A consultant may leave a session with a PD feeling like he or she "told" too much, rather than "showing."

Writing consultants who work with PDs must be gentle. PDs’ feelings can be easily hurt, and a painful experience may deter them from returning. Also, consultants should be careful not to give overly specific directions. While it may be gratifying to work with a writer who asks, respectfully, "How would you write this?" and listens carefully to answers (even taking notes!), it is easy to spend so much time explaining thoughts that the writer misses the chance to learn to problem-solve. Instead of detailed advice, consultants should try giving PDs small tasks that can be completed successfully during the consultation. For example, when a PD who needs to refocus the entire introduction asks for an opinion, a consultant might suggest, "Well, why don’t you rewrite the thesis statement first and then we’ll talk about what changes may work." After the writer re-drafts the thesis statement, the consultant should be sure to praise the effort, regardless of the quality; then suggest a next step. In this way, the consultant can encourage initiative and independent problem solving, something PDs often find difficult.

Working with Passive Independents

Since writing consultants are so dedicated to helping motivate writers to improve, they may be especially frustrated by Pis who do not want to do any more work than necessary, and who do not seem to care much about their grades. These students may show up without a draft, unconcerned that the paper is due in a few hours. They might write a great paper, but turn it in a week late, or not at all.

The best thing consultants can do in this situation is not to take the writers’ behavior personally. Consultants should try not to overreact by pushing writers to do more, or by praising them excessively for tiny efforts; instead, they should be matter-of-fact, clear, and let the writers deal with the natural consequences of their actions. For example, a PI might say, "I know the documentation isn’t right, but I’m going to leave
it like that.” A consultant could reply, “Okay, it’s your choice,” in a normal
tone of voice and then move on. Since PIs accomplish short-term goals
more readily than long-term goals (which can seem overwhelming,
inspiring apathy), consultants should give them clear directions, short-
term tasks to complete, and then leave them alone as they work. By not
making frequent comments that PIs interpret as “nagging,” consultants
can help PIs avoid expressing their ambivalence in ways that hamper their
learning.

Writing centers can also make it easier for PIs to use their services
by not forbidding teachers to require appointments (since passive types
will generally do only what is required), and by making their services as
easy to use as possible. For example, PIs may be more likely to use the web
board of an OWL if it seems easier to them than setting up a face-to-face
appointment, making the trip to the Writing Center, and so on (Dziuban,
Moskal, and Dziuban).

The system also helps writing consultants realize that they need
a repertoire of different behaviors that they can try with different students.
Research has shown that teachers who have a wider range of teaching
styles are likely to be more successful (Sternberg and Grigorenko 705). It
is logical to assume that writing consultants with a wider range of styles
are also likely to be more successful, and writing center research has begun
to bear out this assumption (e.g., Jane M. Kirby’s investigation of Gregorc
“mind styles” in the Writing Center found that the ability for writing
consultants to “flex,” or to use techniques characteristic of several
different styles, was critical to success).

Long’s system can also help writing consultants become more
aware of how their own Reactive Behavior Patterns affect their tutoring
practices. For example, independent types may not consider it important
to give approval, because they have so little need for approval themselves.
But if an independent writing consultant habitually gives only suggestions
for improvement, without praising strengths, dependent writers may
interpret this as a negative judgment of the paper. This practice causes
unnecessary stress, and can hinder writers by making them less confident in
their abilities. Dependent writing consultants, by contrast, may uncon-
sciously seek approval from writers, ending sessions with questions like,
“Have I helped you?” Independent writers who take this question at face
value may respond flippantly, “Yeah, I guess,” or “Kinda.” Writing
consultants need to recognize that these statements are off-hand remarks,
not negative comments on the consulting.

Similarly, aggressive and passive consultants can benefit from
recognizing different motivations. An aggressive consultant may be
highly motivated to identify every potential revision on a paper, but
passive writers would likely find this goal so overwhelming they would
not want to continue working. A passive consultant who follows the
philosophy "Why do extra work?" might prefer to suggest only bare minimum revisions, while aggressive writers eagerly—even annoyingly—request a longer and longer list of suggestions.

Finally, these strategies can help us critically examine our beliefs about what a Writing Center should accomplish. Towards this end, several studies have been conducted which sought to identify which different reactive behavior patterns are typical for writing center writers and consultants, and how students with different behavior patterns generally perform in their writing classes.

Conclusion

Cognitive styles research, including Long Reactive Behavior Patterns, can help us critically examine our writing center practices. True, the Long system does have a few drawbacks. The pathological connotations of Long's labels may be bothersome to writing center directors, and the system is not as rigorously researched as other personality tests (though it is worth noting that questions have been raised even about the venerable MBTI; Sternberg and Grigorenko). Also, the various patterns may seem more like abilities or traits than styles, particularly in an educational context where some patterns are clearly more useful than others; Long's use of the terms "types" and "traits" may be confusing in this regard.

At the same time, by giving insight into why certain writers behave as they do, Long's system can help Writing Center staff grapple with behavior issues. Writing consultants can develop a repertoire of different strategies without needing to diagnose or label particular writers; when one strategy does not do the job, another strategy can be tried.

Additionally, the Long system can help us sort out which behaviors constitute "misuse" of a Writing Center. For example, frequent Writing Center use has often been equated with "overdependence" on the Writing Center. But frequent Writing Center users who seek outside approval should be considered differently than frequent users for whom Writing Center use has become a ritual. And some writers, such as Aggressive Independents, are unlikely to become dependent on the Writing Center no matter how often they use our services.

Long patterns are valuable because they give us another way of understanding the writers with whom we work. One common tendency we all share is the desire to make those near us become like us. We may perceive the differences in the personalities and behaviors of others to be flaws that need fixing. If we do this, we are missing out on the benefits of such differences. Writing centers are predicated on the assumption that
multiple perspectives are valid. Examining behavior patterns can give us a better understanding of how these multiple perspectives affect our work.

Notes

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2 Available online at www.active-learning-site.com.

3 For more information, contact Charles D. Dziuban, Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Central Florida, P.O. Box 161250, Orlando, FL 32816-1250; dziuban@ucf.edu.

Works Cited


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