DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 577 CS 213 616

AUTHOR Thompson, Thomas C.
TITLE De-Programming Our Responses: The Effects of Personality on Teacher Responses.
PUB DATE 19 Mar 92
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Grading; Higher Education; *Personality Traits; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Response; Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS English Teachers; *Myers Briggs Type Indicator

ABSTRACT

Written responses to student writing assignments often can take the form of being directives which seem to try to control the student, and student response to such directive comments appears ambivalent. A logical question concerning such modes of response is to ask how a teacher's comments are influenced by his or her personality type. A study was described to investigate this relationship in the work of seven respondents. The study used two scales from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, namely, the Thinking and Feeling ways of making decisions, and the Judging and Perceiving ways of managing the environment. Results indicated that Judging types tended to focus more than Perceiving types on word or phrase level problems, while Perceiving types focused more on larger level revisions. Other significant differences were seen between these two types of readers. When grouped according to Thinking and Feeling preferences, the differences are less pronounced. Thinking types gave more advice, especially for essay level problems. Through experience, it appears that teachers of writing change in their attitudes toward the teacher student relationship, while maintaining the marks of their type. In short, teacher type preferences do show up among even experienced teachers. Thus, training and experience both certainly affect responding habits, but personality also continues to have an enduring influence. (Three figures showing responses are attached.) (HB)

Thomas C. Thompson

The following paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication; Cincinnati, OH; March 19, 1992.

De-Programming Our Responses:

The Effects of Personality on Teacher Responses

In Ron Lunsford and Rick Straub's *Twelve Readers Reading*, teacher responses are categorized by both "focus" (that aspect of the student text to which the response directs attention) and "mode" (the way the response is framed). For that project, I helped "rate" teacher comments--that is, put them in different categories--and I remember when one rater characterized the responses of one of the readers as "very controlling" because they were so often framed in the "directive" mode. "Controlling" somehow sounded like a bad word to me, and the reader in question apparently thought so, too, because he took exception to it later, when the authors discussed their findings at a CCCC panel. In fact, the reader produced two graduate students who said that they found his comments extremely helpful, and not controlling in the least. Still, many of the reader's comments were directives--instructions for the student to do something in particular to improve or otherwise "fix" the text; in fact, nearly 20% of his comments were directives, compared to a rate of less than 10% (and even as little as 4%) for most of the other readers.

So why was I bothered? Possibly because I recognized my own responding style as very directive, and now that seemed bad. But those were the kinds of comments I liked to get from teachers--they were the kinds of comments I found most helpful--so they were the kinds of comments I gave my students. If such

comments were helpful to me, I reasoned, shouldn't they also be helpful to my students?

According to Kim Haimes Korn, they should be helpful--sometimes. Her study on student responses to teacher comments found that some students may, with respect to their written texts, prefer to be told what to do and how to do it. One student explained his position this way:

> I don't care if someone says, "This paper sucks." That doesn't bother me. It is their opinion and they are entitled to it like I am entitled to mine. I like [directions] instead of asking me questions. I am saying what I mean, so [teachers should] tell me what [they] want. (100-101)

But not all students feel that way. Another student said she preferred personal responses:

> I really like my last teacher because he always got more personal in his comments. He might say, "This made me laugh," "I can see this," or "This happened to me too." [My current teacher's] responses are not as personal as his were. (109-110)

One might dismiss these disparate views by claiming that "There's no accounting for taste," but I suspect that personality type theory may help to account, at least in part, for certain student and teacher preferences regarding written responses to student texts.

Before trying to account for those differences, however, I need to explain the context of this study. Some of my earlier work suggested that the written responses of beginning teachers showed a reasonably strong influence of both the teacher's training and the teacher's personality type. A study by Muffy Siegel suggested that teaching experience also influenced teacher responses, both in terms of <u>what</u>

teachers responded to and how they phrased those comments. I wondered, then, to what extent the influences of personality type that I found in the comments of beginning teachers would be evident in the responses of teachers who had considerable experience, both in the classroom and in the study of composition theory.

Type Theory: the Thinking-Feeling and Judging-Perceiving Scales

Carl Jung's theory of personality types hypothesizes that people have different ways of taking in and using information, and that they tend to prefer certain ways over others. A preference for one strategy over another is rather like a preference for using the right or left hand: most people can use both hands for many tasks, but most are more comfortable and more adept with one hand or the other. Likewise, when it comes to making decisions, people may have a variety of possible strategies, but they tend to prefer certain ones, use them more often, and become more adept at them.

To make Jung's theory practical, Isabel Myers developed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a self-report instrument designed to indicate the respondent's preferences on the three scales hypothesized by Jung and a fourth scale Myers found implied by Jung but not yet fully explained. For a thorough discussion of all four scales, see Isabel Myers' *Gifts Differing* or George Jensen and John DiTiberio's *Personality and the Teaching of Composition*. The present study, however, focuses on only two of the scales: the Thinking and Feeling ways of making decisions, and the Judging and Perceiving ways of managing the environment.

Thinking judgment is analytical and impersonal. It's the kind of judgment Mr. Spock generally used on the Enterprise. It may seem harsh at times, but it's fair--it involves weighing all the relevant facts to arrive at a logical, impartial decision. I suspect it's also the kind of judgment behind the student remark above, in which the student didn't care how blunt the teacher's comments were. With respect to comments on a paper, a student who prefers Thinking judgment is likely to say, "Tell me what's good, tell me what's bad, and tell me how to make it better." A teacher who prefers Thinking judgment will probably do just that, separating the student from the student's work-- with "work" usually meaning the text--and trying to render fair, impartial evaluations of that work. With Thinking judgment at work, a teacher tells students, "Don't take your grade personally; it's a measure of the quality of your work, not a measure of your personal worth."

Feeling judgment, however, may "take it personally." A teacher who prefers Feeling judgment will also try to be fair, but is likely to weigh personal values into the equation before rendering a decision. On the Enterprise, Dr. McCoy's Feeling judgment often brought up the human factor to counter to Spock's impersonal logic. A student who prefers Feeling judgment may share the view voiced earlier by the second student, that it's important for the teacher to be more personal with responses.

The Judging-Perceiving scale indicates ways to manage one's environment: with a preference for organization and closure or with one for openness and spontaneity. Judging types like to have things finished when possible, or at least in

order. For teachers responding to papers, I think a preference for Judging shows up as a tendency to accept the content of a paper as reasonably closed, and to work to put that content into the best form possible. A colleague who is a Judging type recently mentioned that he has to watch himself or he will "fix" all the little problems he sees in a student paper. A Judging type myself, I recognize a similar tendency in my own responding practices: even when conferencing on early drafts, I want to correct minor errors and suggest improvements in wording. I think this penchant for tying up loose ends may lead to the directive comments I mentioned at the beginning of this talk--those comments that say, "Here's how to fix that problem," or "Do this, and it'll be OK."

Perceiving types, on the other hand, are less concerned with tidying up what's on hand than with finding out what else might be available. Why bother to try to assemble the puzzle when half the pieces may still be in the box? Teachers with a preference for Perceiving may have a tendency to try to open up further inquiry rather than to settle for organizing and polishing the ideas already at hand. To turn again to my own experience, a Perceiving colleague who regularly reads my work almost invariably raises questions that force me to reconsider my views or to find additional information; only rarely does he offer stylistic suggestions.

Teacher Responses

If Judging types like to "fix" the text, then many of their comments should focus on aspects of the text that can be "fixed" fairly easily--problems with wording or sentence structure, or errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and such.

--Insert Figure 1 about here--

Figure 1 shows the distribution of comments for the seven readers (in *Twelve Readers Reading*) who agreed to fill out the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and let me use their scores. The numbers represent the percentage of comments in each of the categories listed on the rubric used in *Twelve Readers*; the categories on the top half of the chart refer to the focus of each comment, or what the comment refers to, and those on the bottom half refer to the mode of each comment, or how it is framed.

Four of the respondents were judging types, and three were perceiving types. Although it's unwise to try to make very broad claims based on a sample of only seven teachers, a quick look at the average percent of each kind of response shows that the Judging types tended to focus more than the Perceiving types on word- or phrase-level issues, while Perceiving types focused more than Judging types on issues likely to require re-thinking or large-level revision. Specifically, the Perceiving types focused more often on issues of global structure (i.e., anything having to do with large units of discourse) and ideas (i.e., content), while Judging types focused more often on expression (i.e., wording problems) and correctness/convention (i.e., mechanical and grammatical errors). That's not to say that one type of teacher focused exclusively on one kind of issue--most teachers had comments in most categories--but only to note that certain patterns, possibly related to type preferences, seem to show up even in the responses of seven highly trained, experienced responders.

With respect to mode, type theory suggests that the Judging types would be

more likely to make evaluations--statements that close off further development--and that Perceiving types would ask more questions to open up additional inquiry. Somewhat surprisingly, the percentage of evaluative comments is about the same for both groups, and if we add the qualified evaluations (which include an acknowledgement of the reader's subjectivity), the Perceiving types actually seem more evaluative. Fine-tuning the categories, however, helps clear up the apparent confusion.

--Insert Figure 2 about here--

Figure 2 breaks the evaluative questions down into those that are clearly positive ("An insightful observation," "This is a solid piece of writing") and those that are clearly negative ("There's not enough detail here," "This sentence is confusing"). What we discover is that the Judging types have a higher percentage of negative evaluations, while the Perceiving types have a higher percentage of positive evaluations. Even for individual teachers, three of the four Judging types used more negative than positive evaluations, and all three Perceiving types used more positive than negative evaluations. It would seem that, at least for this sample of teachers, the Judging types evaluate more often in the traditional sense of pointing out errors.

A similar pattern appears when the questions are divided into "open" and "closed" categories. "Open" questions typically invite students to re-think an issue or to develop it further ("How do you come across here," "How does this idea relate to the last paragraph"); "closed" questions imply an answer ("Isn't one example

enough," "What beach are you talking about"). With this distinction, the pattern is as expected: the Perceiving types have more open questions, and the Judging types have more closed questions. Again, the Perceiving types (in this sample) seem to be oriented more towards opening up the text--maybe looking towards revision--while the Judging types seem more oriented towards managing and evaluating the text as it stands.

--Insert Figure 3 about here--

Regrouping the teachers according to thinking and feeling preferences, as in Figure 3, reveals a different pattern. With these groupings, the differences in focus are minimal, except that the Thinking types seemed to attend more often to whole essay-level issues. A few differences show up in mode, or the framing of the comments. The thinking types gave more advice, while the Feeling types offered more evaluations. In this case, dividing comments into positive and negative evaluations or open and closed questions made no difference. These apparent trends are not readily explainable, though the frequency of evaluative comments seems consistent with the goals expressed by some Feeling teachers I've interviewed: specifically, they seemed to want to let students know "how they were doing," so they would make frequent responses of the "this is working" or "this is not working" variety. At this point, I have no explanation for the higher frequency of advisory responses by Thinking types.

Other Factors to Consider

Of course, part of the difficulty in trying to talk about these numbers by

themselves is that they reflect only quantitative data, and some of the type-related differences may be disguised when comments are forced into categories. For example, a teacher who regularly makes negative evaluations such as "wrong word!" could, with different punctuation, turn that evaluation into a seeming question: "wrong word?" Likewise, a naturally directive teacher could take a directive comment ("Move this paragraph to the end") and turn it into a suggestion ("You might move this paragraph to the end"), a question ("Wouldn't this paragraph work better at the end"), or even a qualified evaluation ("I don't think this paragraph works here"). The teacher's immediate goal for the response probably hasn't changed--after all, the comment still refers to the same passage, and ultimately recommends the same revision--but the change in phrasing presents the teacher in a slightly different light each time.

I suspect--though I present this claim only tentatively--that the "teacher presented on the page" is likely to change (as a result of training, experience, or some other external influence) before the "teacher behind the comments" actually changes. A genuine change in attitude toward the teacher-student relationship, or toward the goals of responding, should show up as a change in the focus and mode of written comments; a change in the phrasing of comments could also be a way to disguise the teacher's authentic self. Counting and categorizing comments can be useful, then, but only to a point.

At any rate, type theory maintains that we don't change our type, though with growth we begin to develop skills related to our non-preferred processes. And

it is in the development of those skills, I think, that learning about type may be useful. We have probably all tried some new responding strategy, only to discover that it felt awkward or artificial, or maybe we have seen a beginning teacher try (unsuccessfully) to use a responding style that just didn't "fit." Such superficial changes in style, when unaccompanied by a more fundamental change in attitudes or goals, may be like trying to write with our non-preferred hand: the result may be passable, but not terribly effective. Rather than try to teach in an unnatural or uncomfortable style, Jensen has suggested that teachers may use a knowledge of type to reach students of different types, then teach from their strengths (188). That is, we can remain true to our intentions for responding, but develop responding skills that allow us to reach a broader range of students, and reach them more effectively. I suspect the teachers in this sample have done that intuitively, since they have some very different personality types, but can be, in their individual ways, very effective responders.

Conclusion

Earlier, I asked to what extent do teacher type preferences would show up in the responses of these highly experienced responders. The answer seems to be that they show up at least enough to be noticeable, and therefore enough to deserve our attention.

My point, then, is fairly simple: training certainly affects responding practices (or there'd be no reason to bother teaching courses on it), and experience also influences those practices (or we would show no growth over the years), but

personality also seems to have a consistent and enduring influence. As we examine our own responding practices, then, we would well do to consider how our personality preferences influence those practices.

Thomas C. Thompson
English Department
The Citadel
Charleston, SC 20409

REFERENCES

Haimes-Corn, Kim. "Through the Students' Eyes: Perceptions of Teacher Control and Teacher Involvement in Written Comments." Master's Thesis. Florida State University, 1991.

Jensen, George H. "Learning Styles." *Applications of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in Higher Education*. Judith Provost and Scott Anchors, Eds. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1987.

Jensen, George H. and John K. DiTiberio. *Personality and the Teaching of Composition*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub. Corp., 1989.

Lunsford, Ronald, and Richard Straub. *Twelve Readers Reading*. New York: Random House, forthcoming.

Myers, Isabel Briggs. *Gifts Differing*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1980.

Siegel, Muffy E. A. "Responses to Student Writing from New Composition Faculty." *College Composition and Communication* 33 (October 1982): 302-09.

Thompson, Thomas C. "Personality Type and Responding to Student Writing: Directions for Study." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Boston, March 22, 1991). ERIC ED 332 208.

AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF J & P RESPONSES IN EACH CATEGORY
(Using categories from *Twelve Readers Reading)*

	Judging Types	Perceiving Types
FOCUS		
Global Structure	**11.7**	**16.5**
Local Structure	4.0	3.9
Expression	**10.7**	**1.0***
Correctness/Convention	**9.6**	**2.7****
Voice	3.6	6.2
Naming	4.7	3.3
Development	13.4	11.0
Ideas	**25.6**	**35.1**
Whole Essay/Other	16.6	20.2
MODE		
Corrective	4.2	0.0
Directive	6.7	5.2
Advisory	11.0	7.2
Evaluative	17.2	17.8
Qualified Evaluation	6.6	11.8
Indirect Request	1.0	1.2
Problem-Posing	14.9	13.8
Heuristic	6.3	7.0
Other	32.1	36.0

*p < .05 **p < .01

Figure 1

AVERAGE NUMBER OF RESPONSES:
POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EVALUATIONS,
OPEN AND CLOSED QUESTIONS

	Judging Types	Perceiving Types
Positive Evaluations	8.8	12.0
Negative Evaluations	12.8	5.5
Open Questions	8.0	15.0
Closed Questions	15.0	5.3

Figure 2

AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF T & F RESPONSES IN EACH CATEGORY
(Using categories from *Twelve Readers Reading*)

	Thinking Types	Feeling Types
FOCUS		
Global Structure	14.8	11.3
Local Structure	3.4	4.7
Expression	6.6	9.0
Correctness/Convention	6.5	8.5
Voice	3.5	5.4
Naming	3.1	5.7
Development	14.1	10.9
Ideas	26.5	31.3
Whole Essay/Other	21.5	13.1
MODE		
Corrective	0.1	6.3
Directive	6.1	6.3
Advisory	**14.3**	**4.3***
Evaluative	**12.8**	**23.1**
Qualified Evaluation	8.6	7.8
Indirect Request	1.4	0.6
Problem-Posing	16.7	11.9
Heuristic	8.6	4.0
Other	31.3	35.7

*$p < .05$

Figure 3