# Dissent: Considering Culture and Personality

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If “argument" and “arguing" (O’Keefe 1977) are both mired in culture and the personal, then how we conceive of argument-making and argument-having can both be influenced by where we come from and who we are. This paper functions as a discussion based on investigations into the factors of culture and personality within critical reasoning classrooms. Contrary to what we may believe or want, who you are and where you come from might matter more than we want them to.

KEYWORDS: argument, critical reasoning, critical thinking, culture, general education, temperament

## 1. INTRODUCTION

My approach to arguments is open-minded, valuing theories and methods that acknowledge and incorporate different modes of argument (Gilbert 1994). A pivotal attribute of this approach is that it acknowledges that the field continuously grows and changes, so that it is not a stagnant outlook of argumentation. People and their means of communication change over time depending on culture, subculture, age, status, gender, relationships, and contexts that they find themselves in; it follows from this that the theories that describe and address the communication of arguments should be amenable to such changes as well. I share this as an introduction to provide a glimpse into the spirit behind current research, empirical in nature.

If argument and arguing, argument$_1$ and argument$_2$ (O’Keefe 1977), are both enmeshed in culture and the personal, then how we conceive of argument-making and argument-having can both be influenced by where we come from and who we are. This paper functions as a discussion based on investigations into the factors of culture and personality within multiple deliveries of a general education course that has a specific focus on informal logic. I share empirical results of two ongoing studies within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The first study that I discuss reviews reflective and critical practices of English language learners (ELL) in a general education course titled *Reasoning in Everyday Language* (REL). The second study that I discuss relates to temperament and student success in a course

titled *Techniques of Persuasion* (ToP). General education courses function as courses that are interdisciplinary in nature and offer breadth to a degree. Being a general education course at a large metropolitan Canadian university, the students who enrol in such courses are heterogeneous in nature. Students could be from any faculty, studying any major, and they can be taking one of the first courses within their degrees or their last. So, other than being students, there's little else that is similar across all enrolled students.

## 2. CULTURE

REL is a new general education course, developed and delivered inaugurally in 2016-2017. It is open to students who identify as ELL, as there is an emphasis on language skills. Students were given participation assignments throughout the course. 10% of the participation grade involved completion of text exercises in a critical thinking textbook, and 10% of the participation grade involved writing a reflection. The reflection responded to questions from Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (2011). The questionnaire encourages students towards reflexivity by creating, "a habit of looking back at learning" (Hessler & Rupiper Taggart, 2011). The questions include: At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening? At what moment in class this week were you most distanced from what was happening? What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful? What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing? What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you). These are open-ended questions, and students were encouraged in the instructions to justify and expand their thoughts.

In analyzing reflections from the 2016-2017 course only, Ryan's scale for reflective practice was used (2013). The four levels in this scale include Level 1: Reporting and Responding (What was the incident/challenge/opportunity?); Level 2: Relating (Have you seen this before? What skills can you apply?); Level 3: Reasoning (Add a critical perspective to deepen reflection; use sources to support your ideas); Level 4: Reconstructing (Reconstruct future practice, or offer advice or recommendations, given your reflection). In particular the third and fourth levels of reflective ability encompass the skill of argument-making.

A summary of results follow. 80% of students completed all textbook activities; 60% of students completed all reflective activities.

Thus, the end-of chapter questions in a textbook had more student engagement. Only 10% of students took advantage of extra reflection opportunities. 40% of students had the hypothesized results: to continually perform better on reflective activities. Furthermore, 100% of learners had a higher-grade average in textbook exercises than reflections. Overall, students could discuss what happened in a particular class or unit of instruction, by summarizing relevant events, but they could not make connections with their experiences, their analytical thoughts, or think of paths moving forward given their observations. It follows from this study that all students were firmly rooted in Level 1 reflective ability, which involves mainly reporting and summarizing some thought or event.

Some of the suggested pedagogical outcomes from this inaugural study into ELL and reflective practice include: make no assumptions regarding students reflective backgrounds and experiences; reflective practice may need to be modelled to students; students need practice to hone the skill of critical reflection (Coulson and Harvey 2013). However some of the qualitative feedback from student reflections revealed that students had no familiarity with argument-making as they were being asking to demonstrate (i.e. Level 3 and/or 4 reflective writing). While ELL could evaluate arguments when given informal logic tools, expecting them to be able to employ the skill of argumente-making, in order to craft their own strong views, was presumptuous on the part of the instructor.

Students often expressed that they preferred that the instructor, "just tell them what to write because they want to do well, but they don't know how to do well." Exploration around this reveals that argument-making, in an informal logic sense, was foreign to many ELL because their educational background taught them that the term "argument" is associated with formal logic. Providing a claim or thesis, that is opinionated in nature, with supporting rationale was foreign to many students. There is scholarly dialogue about this cultural gap in argument-making and thinking critically. O'Sullivan and Guo (2011) and Guo and O'Sullivan (2012) engage in discussions of cultural gaps in Chinese ELL studying in graduate school in Ontario Canada, where thinking critically was conflated with formal logic.

What this shows, from a pedagogical perspective, is that being cognizant of learners' cultural backgrounds is important. While this study did not have a large enough sample size to make any firm conclusions, there is a general lack of critical thinking and reasoning skills with most ELL. Whether or not this relates to culture is impossible to determine. More data has been collected since this presentation was delivered though, and it seems to confirm the results rendered. There may be cultural differences with reflective practices.

Western culture values reflection levels 1 to 4 hierarchically, where level 1 (reporting) is inferior to the other levels (Ryan 2013). From an argumentation perspective, this study confirms that arguments that fall within the model of informal logic are not universal. Requiring students to develop a reflection that makes a claim and supports it with evidence should not be assumed as the "norm" for post-secondary students. It also prompts the question of whether introducing students to certain argumentation models, in a general education course where the instructor can make such discretions, is a result of the instructor's cultural bias. It is clear from this study that education outside of western culture can influence how students engage in argument-making. It seems, though, that culture can mold even instructors' discretions, not just learners' strengths and weaknesses, when we set aside expectations surrounding argument-making.

## 3. TEMPERAMENT

In the 1990s there was a resurgence of interest and progress in personality research (Rothbart et. al., 2000, p. 122). Temperament is an innate system of how a human is organized, which is revealed through particular behaviours, talents, values, and needs (Keirsey, 1998). A clinical distinction between two aspects of human personality are temperament and character (Cloninger, 1994, p. 266 ), and so understanding our temperament helps us understand aspects of our personality. The difference between the two is that while character is dispositional and addresses the configuration of our habits, temperament is pre-dispositional and addresses emotion-based habits and skills, our inclinations (Keirsey, 1998; Cloninger, 1994, p. 268).

There are four established temperaments according to neurobehavioral studies (Cloninger, 1994, pp. 267, 271); however, there has been a pattern of different researchers renaming temperament variables, even when the content of the previous and renamed constructs is similar. This yields an apparent lack of agreement about the subject matter of temperament that may not be merited (Rothbart, 1999). For the purposes of this presentation the names used are those associated with the commercialized test for temperament that was used in the study. The four temperaments are *gold, green, blu*e, and *orange*.

For those whose primary temperament is gold, it is important to feel a sense of belonging or affiliation with others or groups, as well as a sense of responsibility (McKim, 2003, p. 33; Berens, 2006, pp. 12, 25). Responsible in nature, they seek to be dutiful, to protect, and preserve (Berens, 2006, p. 12). They tend to orient concretely, that is, in the present and tangible. As Golds tend to be task-oriented, and hard-working at that, they become anxious, or destabilized, when

disorganization or conflict arise (McKim, 2003, p. 33). Given the need to be responsible, to meet deadlines and expectations, a Gold will excel in a classroom context, even if the material is not his/her main interest, because they are naturally taskmasters.

For those whose primary temperament is green, the acquisition of knowledge, being competent, and achieving mastery are primary needs (McKim, 2003, p. 28; Berens, 2006, pp. 14, 24). Greens are natural thinkers and theorists who seek to explore phenomena, have tendencies of skepticism, and expect rationale for everything (Berens, 2006, p. 14). They also tend to orient abstractly, as opposed to *in the here and now* (McKim, 2003, p. 29). Generally, most typical assignments in academia satisfy the needs, values, and talents of the Greens. Tests, essays, and presentations, for examples, assess mastery of knowledge in a manner that is abstract (e.g. hypothetical situations, assessment of world events using concepts and theories, summarizing knowledge learned). Characterized as *life learners,* Greens could thus thrive in an academic environment.

For those whose primary temperament is blue, they tend to seek identity, meaning, and significance in life (McKim, 2003, p. 37; Berens, 2006, pp. 16, 24). Blues tend to be relationship oriented, gravitating towards harmonious and cooperative social contexts, and they avoid conflict at all costs (McKim, 2003, p. 37). They, like Greens, orient more abstractly than concretely. A blue is typically more interested in having peaceful relationships, which lends to a deep concern for others and being empathic and supportive naturally. They tend to orient more emotionally (McKim, 2003, p. 37), in contrast with Greens who trust their heads before their hearts. Since Blues tend to be relationship-oriented and are satisfied, or content, when they feel connected to people, typical academic assignments do not meet the needs of their temperament. Essay and test writing do not require one to be mindful of other people. They also are not paths to finding life's meanings, at least not essay assignments that have strict rubric expectations. Blues are in optimal learning environments when the development of self and relationships are incorporated.

For those whose primary temperament is orange, core needs include the freedom to be oneself, to choose, and to act. It is important for an Artisan to make an impact, typically by achieving the intended results of his/her actions (McKim, 2003, p. 41; Berens, 2006, pp. 10, 25). They are improvisers and tend to be absorbed in the action of the moment, focusing on the present and concrete (Berens, 2006, p. 10). Typically Oranges are speedy in what they do, quick to make decisions, and are comfortable assuming various tasks, becoming bored more easily than other temperament types (McKim, 2003, p. 42). They can be more adventurous than others, but Oranges are practical and task-

oriented (McKim, 2003, p. 42) and tend to bore easily of abstract ideas. They would tend to prefer action-oriented tasks, perhaps *moving* their bodies, as they are tactical in nature. Since many assignments are driven by written discourse, requiring abstract thinking and not our knowledge of the world, an Orange's needs typically are not met in an academic classroom.

For the most part, the vast research of temperament is in developmental psychology and focuses on infants and children. In the education sector, you can find plenty of studies on temperament; however, the literature tends to focus on children. Our temperament does not disappear as we age though; it influences our adult lives too. Rothbart et al. (2000) write that, "temperament arises from our genetic endowment. It influences and is influenced by the experience of each individual, and one of its outcomes is the adult personality" (p. 122) – which is of particular interest in the post-secondary, diverse, general education classroom.

### *3.1 Temperament Study in Post-Secondary Education*

ToP is a full year general education course that has a significant emphasis on informal logic. The research conducted on this course intersects the areas of informal logic, general education/first year experience, the scholarship of teaching and learning, e-learning, personality/temperament. The overarching research question asks whether or not there are any connections between a student's temperament and his or her informal logic and/or critical thinking skills. While the project has a mixed methods approach, it is only the quantitative data that are included here. The quantitative data includes a collection of students' temperament preferences (based on an assessment tool) as well as their grades in all assignments, plus their final grade in the course. Data spans from January 2016 to 2018, from both blended and online deliveries of this particular general education course.

The extant literature on the relation between temperament and academic achievement consist of few studies and the corresponding findings are mixed. For example, whereas one study found that temperament is independent from critical thinking (Kreber, 1998), another study (Sefcik et al., 2009) found a significant relation between temperament and scores on a cognitive test. Furthermore, their results indicated that individuals who have blue as their primary temperament scored lower on these cognitive tests than individuals with other temperaments. This is not an identical trend to the current findings, but there is some overlap with results in the current study.

The initial hypothesis of this study was concerned with whether individuals who prefer blue and orange temperaments, given their characteristics, may not typically be engaged or satisfied in a traditional class format and setting. The assignments in the courses that were studied included: a test, a multiple choice quiz, a Rogerian argument style letter, and a critical essay. We have run different analyses (a regression analysis, ANOVA), and the results that are the most conservative indicate statistically significant results with respect to the Rogerian letter assignment only. Table 1 summarizes some of the data.

| Primary Temperament | Sample size | Letter Mean (std. deviation) | Quiz Mean | Test Mean | Essay Mean | Final Grade |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Golds | 80 | 70.01 (16.5) | 63.57 | 67.89 | 70.85 | 76.76 |
| Blues | 44 | **73.9 (6.6)** | 51.74 | 64.48 | 70.13 | 73.77 |
| Oranges | 27 | 61.89 (22.4) | 49.45 | 62.68 | 65.63 | 70.52 |
| Greens | 23 | 70.96 (17.0) | 63.51 | 69.6 | 67.24 | 74.13 |
| | 174 | 69.86 | 58.37 | 66.45 | 69.38 | 74.69 |

Table 1 – Summary of Temperament and Mean across all ToP

The argumentative letter assignment employs a Rogerian style of argument; it's between 750 and 900 words. In this assignment students were expected to choose an issue from a short list provided (e.g. Should we condone self-driving cars? Should women breast-feed in public? Is global warming real?), find a specific person/group's stance on the issue (e.g. Tesla Founder and CEO, Elon Musk) and aim to convince this person/group of an alternative perspective (e.g. it is dangerous to implement self-driving cars in society). Learning objectives relevant to this writing assignment included researching and summarizing arguments succinctly, comparing/contrasting arguments, justifying viewpoints, and most importantly addressing a

hostile/resistant audience in an empathetic and collaborative manner as a technique of persuasion. The strategy inherent in a Rogerian letter is to delay one's thesis until rapport is built through commonalities between writer and resistance audience.

Prior to the study it was hypothesized that there would be a trend demonstrating that Greens and Golds would have an advantage in the success of academic assignments. The data does not show this though. It does show that Blues excelled at the letter writing assignment. From a pedagogical perspective: the argumentative letter assignment was completed mid-term, and it required demonstration of mostly *analyzing* according to Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive skills, but also *creating* (Bloom et al., 1956). Students researched and reviewed different positions of a given, timely, issue. Students asked questions about the implications of different views on the issue, and interpreted the best standpoint given their research and thinking. Developing a new, amalgamated position, so that both writer and audience could be satisfied was a strong outcome, whereas a weaker letter failed to negotiate wants and needs of both arguer and audience. This expectation of synthesizing competing views to develop a palatable conclusion by writer and audience is a more creative activity, arguably. In other assignments, the main cognitive skills tested were *applying* and *evaluating*. This assignment prompted learners to engage in a strategy that fosters collaboration and relationship building in contexts of dissensus. It does not seem coincidental that Blues tend to be relationship-driven if any temperament is.

So, while most learners may adapt to typical expected academic evaluations with training (which begins long before post-secondary education), and every type of person can succeed, overall not all learners did as well, in relation to Blues, with this *alternative* assignment. On the one hand this is informative for pedagogical reasons, but on the other it confirms what some may intuitively acknowledge within argumentation: that there are many successful ways to come to agreement in dissensus. Typical normative models (informal logic, formal logic, pragma-dialectics) may not always apply, or they may not be pragmatic. In reference to Walton's dialogues (1998), Rogerian arguing style does not fit precisely into any of the dialogues – it has some of the goals of persuasion but accurate information (truth) is important, and it certainly does not aim to result in a win-lose outcome. There seems to be a connection between these empirical observations of argument-making and argument-having with a gap under the broader umbrella of Argumentation Theory. This particular dissensus methodology aimed at changing one's mind by being persuasive, dialectical, truthful, empathic – while the rigours of informal logic are expected - goes well beyond just strong argument-making. The

implication of the data may indicate that we do not all excel at being versatile in handling dissensus.

## 4. CONCLUSION

We can excel at argumentation methodologies or modes (e.g. Gilbert) based on cultural advantages or temperament preferences. It does not follow from this that we cannot learn the theory and methods of different argument modes though. Cultural restrictions on education can affect one's critical thinking and reasoning skills, but explicit instruction of these skills (demonstarted in a study of REL subsequent to the one relayed in this presentation) can close the gap between students who can and cannot develop strong critical reflective ability.

Contrary to initial hypotheses temperament does not predict student academic success. However, interlocutors may argue better and gravitate towards argumentation models that appease their personality. The implications as I see them for educators in general education (or Critical Thinking at large) is that if we tend to look at informal logic, or similar *standard* models of argument, as a means for good argumente-making, then this is narrow in nature. Contrary to what we may believe, know, or want, who one is and where one comes from might matter in contexts of argument-making, but more especially in argument-having. While students may be able to learn the tricks to excel in a general education course, it does not follow that students can apply these skills to arguing in real-world contexts such as the Rogerian letter.

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