

# Humanistic Theories that Guide Online Course Design

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## INTRODUCTION

Humanism comes from one of three schools of psychology in which theories are categorized. The other two schools are the schools of behaviorism and cognitivism. It is believed that one school of theory is not better than the other, and individuals are encouraged to apply the theory that is the most appropriate for the student. Theories from the school of humanism focus on students' affective needs which means that the theorists center their attention on feelings, emotions, values, and attitudes (Tomei, 2007). Colonel Parker, once deemed the Father of Progressivism of the nineteenth century by John Dewey, promoted creating curriculum with the child at its center. He wanted the school to be a replica of home, an inclusive community, and a budding democracy for the students. Parker's work and thought on curriculum would eventually be an apparent part of John Dewey's progressive work (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996).

Years later, G. Stanley Hall fervently criticized a report created by the Committee of Ten that promoted fitting children in a learning mold that consisted of canned subjects that were meant to be taught to all students in the same way without individualization of any kind. Hall rejected these ideas, because he believed that changes in society evolved slowly and that genetics not surroundings impacted students. Unlike Parker's push for individualization so that every child's needs could be met, Hall believed in individualization so that the gifted child would stand out. Eventually, Hall's critics who saw no need for social reform labeled his *laissez-faire* ideas as disastrous (Pinar et al., 1996).

Then, during the 1950s, theorists such as Elliot W. Eisner, Ross Mooney, and Paul Klohr expressed their views concerning curriculum and the need of the educator to design curriculum that focused on self-value. Finally, during the 1960s, humanism began to be thought of as the third psychological orientation that followed theories of behaviorism and cognitivism. At this time, Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, respected

humanistic psychologists, began to contribute papers on humanism which provided the field with an alternative educational view. The change that began to occur was considered to be a paradigm shift in which theorists moved from an interest in curriculum development to an interest in understanding curriculum. It was antiwar efforts and political unrest that helped drive the interest in a curriculum that focused on the self (Pinar et al., 1996).

Researchers noted that in 1975, McNeil presented four conceptions of curriculum: the humanistic, the social reconstructionist, the technological, and the academic curriculum conception (Pinar et al., 1996). The humanistic view brought back the facet of progressivism that looked to child-centered and individual-focused learning experiences. This came as the social reconstructionists tried to bring about societal reform through school reform.

## HUMANISTIC THEORIES AND ONLINE DESIGN

When we look at the past, we see that theorists such as Elliot Eisner and Elizabeth Vallance thought of schooling as a way for individuals to gain personal fulfillment. They thought of it as a means to provide a way for people to discover and create their own identities. Curriculum, at that time, had the responsibility of fostering personal development in many different ways. Theorists began to present their theories through models of teaching and learning (Pinar, et al., 1996). For example, the phenomenal field theory, self-actualization theory, theory on nondirective teaching, theory of moral development, theory of immediacy and social presence, and cooperative learning theory came about.

### Phenomenal Field Theory

A humanistic theorist named Arthur Combs presented his phenomenal field theory with psychologist Donald

Snygg. According to this theory, they postulated that to understand human behavior, the time must be taken to consider the point of view of another. They believed that if one wanted to change another person's behavior that he or she must first modify his or her beliefs or perception. One had to "walk in their shoes" if one wanted to understand and guide change. By taking this line of thinking, educators had to recognize that the learner needed to find meaning and understand the learning as opposed to learning and understanding the strategies (Boeree, 2007; Tomei, 2007).

Combs and Snygg felt that if they were to understand and foresee the behavior of another that they had to reach into the person's phenomenal field. Since it was impossible for them to physically look into another person's mind, they had to make inferences from what was observed. When educators utilize this theory, they cannot choose a topic of instruction and a strategy, implement the learning experience, and expect every child to be motivated by what has been placed before them, because the information does not connect to their own lives. Instead, the educators have to get to know the learner's phenomenal self and create learning experiences that have meaning to the learner. Once instructors take this path, the student that was not motivated to learn at one time will become connected to the learning experience (Boeree, 2007; Tomei, 2007).

### **Self-Actualization Theory**

Nearly forty years ago, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers presented their ideas about personal growth and performance in connection with individual differences in how individuals respond to their physical and social environment. Other theorists who based their theory in the other schools of psychology focused on ability and development. Maslow and Rogers focused on an individual's view of his or her self. Maslow believed that strong beliefs about one's self was connected to the thought of self-actualization. According to his thinking, individuals with strong self-actualization interacted well with others, and they found ways to develop and contribute to the world around them fairly easily. Those who did not have strong self-actualization choose to live within their environment and accept what comes their way, instead of reaching into their environment and making new opportunities happen for themselves. People of this nature are less secure with themselves in their environment and their ability to succeed. Maslow believed that every individual had a force within that

either sought or shunned growth (Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2000; Pinar et al., 1996; Tomei, 2007).

For people to reach the level of self-actualization, they had to be fulfilled at each level of what Maslow referred to as the hierarchy of needs. The first level was the biological level. At this level, an individual's need for food and shelter had to be met before the individual could move to another level. At the next level, the individual would have to feel secure. Level three of the hierarchy of needs demanded that the individual felt as though the individual belonged and was loved. Needs for self-respect, achievement, attention, and recognition needed to be fulfilled if an individual was to move past the esteem level of the hierarchy. When an individual had past each of those levels, the individual had reached the final level, the level of self-actualization. At this point, the individual's ability to reach potential could take place. While each level had to be fulfilled, they did not have to stand alone and one behavior could satisfy more than one level on the hierarchy. Instructors who utilize this theory when designing and conducting a course look to see if their students needs have been met to help them understand student behavior (Joyce et al., 2000; Pinar et al., 1996; Tomei, 2007).

### **Nondirective Teaching Theory**

Carl Rogers believed that in order for people to grow, they needed positive relationships with other people. Instructors who have utilized this theory nurtured their students instead of controlling the learning experience. The nondirective procedure required the teacher to guide students to explore new information and experience new occurrences in the world around them. According to this theory, students and their teachers are partners in learning (Joyce, et al., 2000). Rogers believed that all humans had an innate drive to learn. He felt that when a student viewed the learning as valuable that the experience would be valuable to the student. Educators were expected to create a threat free learning environment where students could initiate learning, and they could think metacognitively about their own learning needs. Teachers were seen as facilitators in the nondirective teaching approach (Joyce et al., 2000; Tomei, 2007).

### **Theory of Moral Development**

Lawrence Kohlberg developed the theory of moral development. According to Kohlberg, individuals moved through different stages that defined their own

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