Chapter 9
Person-Centered Learning:
An Investigation of Perceptions of Learners Utilizing the Person-Centered Model of Instruction

Christopher T. Miller
Morehead State University, USA

ABSTRACT

As the distance grows between the instructor and student within education it becomes necessary to explore new ways of addressing the instruction that goes into distance education. This chapter will describe a distance-based instructional model, the person-centered model of instruction, as well as a case study implementation of the person-centered model of instruction in a web-based course. The case study will focus on an investigation of whether differences in significant learning occurred between a group that used the person-centered model of instruction and a group participating in a constructivist learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

If you look at the history of distance learning there is a common thread running through it. That thread, from early mail-based correspondence courses to instructional television and now to web-based courses, is the constant changing nature of the technology that supports distance learning. Consider when web-based instruction was first used as a delivery system for distance learning. It was primarily asynchronous with support from e-mail, web pages, discussion boards, as well as support from other technologies like audiocassettes, videocassettes, and print materials. While there may have been instances of telnet-based chats it is likely that the primary synchronous technology to support early web-based instruction was the telephone. Now there are a variety of synchronous technologies that support web-based instruction such as audio/video web conferencing tools, and instant messaging.

As the technology changes, the issue of distance is still at the heart. The instructor is not typically close to the student to physically assist them. The issue of distance has not only required the use of various forms of both asynchronous and synchronous communication but has shifted the focus of education on the idea of person-centered instruction. Within this idea the learner needs to take on more

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-751-0.ch009

personal responsibility for their activities while the instructor takes on a more facilitative role including providing resources to the learners. As learner control is increased the learners' responsibilities for learning affect the learner's feelings that learning success is a result of their own work (Altmann & Arambasich, 1982; Rotter, 1989).

It is with these considerations that instructors of distance learning experiences need to consider the use of new models of instruction as well as adaptations of current instructional models to best support learners at a distance. One model of instruction attempting to address this shift of control from instructor to learner in distance learning environments is the person-centered model of instruction based on the humanistic learning theory of Carl Rogers (1969).

The person-centered model of instruction developed by Miller and Mazur (2001) attempts to address the changing format of web-based learning where the learner takes on more responsibility for their educational activities. Three outcomes were theorized for the person-centered model of instruction: (1) the development of a creative product, which should be original and useful to the learner; (2) significant learning, which is an accumulation of knowledge and satisfaction with the learning experience, a desire to master the experience and greater understanding of the problem and potential solutions (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994); and (3) an increase in self-actualization or striving for individual perfection through learning and development of interests.

This case study explores the use of Miller and Mazur's (2001) person-centered model of instruction within an online graduate elementary reading course at a regional accredited university in the Midwestern U.S. A second online graduate elementary reading course taught by the same instructor using their typical constructivist teaching technique was used as a comparison to better understand the potential changes that occurred using the person-centered model of instruction. While three outcomes have been theorized for the person-centered model of instruction this case study description focuses specifically on whether students experienced significant learning. While the other outcomes of self-actualization and development of creative products are not the central focus in this case study description they are discussed elsewhere (Miller, 2007).

The central question focused upon in this case study is whether there is a difference in significant learning between learners participating in a person-centered instructional experience and learners participating in a constructivist instructional experience. Differences will be based on results from a personal perception form given to participants of both instructional experiences as well as an analysis of course products. It should be understood that significant learning has many meanings and in this context should not be confused with statistical significance. When discussing the person-centered model of instruction, significant learning is the term used by Rogers and Freiberg (1994) that describes not only an accumulation of knowledge, but also a satisfaction in the learning, a desire to master the experience, and a greater understanding of the problem and potential solutions. While all three outcomes are desired when using the person-centered model of instruction it is believed that many instructors considering the use of this instructional model will be most interested in the outcome of significant learning within their own web-based learning environments. The outcomes explored in this case study are important to many instructors because the accumulation of knowledge, increased understanding of the problem or concepts, development of quality work, and satisfaction in the learning are typically the desired results of instruction.

THE PERSON-CENTERED MODEL OF INSTRUCTION

Since the twentieth century a wide variety of instructional design models based on behaviorism