

Chapter 3

Person–Centered Online Education: What Carl Rogers Has to Say to Teachers in Computer–Mediated Environment

Daniel J. Henry
Auburn University, USA

ABSTRACT

The great psychologist Carl Rogers not only made major strides in psychotherapy by developing client-centered therapy, but also applied these humanistic principles to teaching and learning. As designers and teachers in the built environment of online learning and teaching seek to design educational experiences exemplifying practices in teaching and learning, an examination of Rogers's person-centered learning can give instructional designers another lens through which to view student engagement and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Carl Rogers and his person-centered psychological approach provided therapists, teachers, social workers, and instructional designers with an important set of tools to think about how human beings learn, and what the relationship is between the teacher and the student. His humanistic approach to education (1969, 1983), which focused not only on the subject being learned, but also the potential of the human being to achieve lifelong benefit and move towards actualizing his or her full potential, represents an important way of

reframing the teaching and learning process, and suggests a useful and valid approach to thinking about new ways of delivering education.

As more teaching and learning move from traditional brick and mortar settings to other modes of content delivery, synchronous and asynchronous, podcasts, the use of social media in instruction, and other technologies yet to be developed, it is important to remember that all teaching, irrespective of the method of delivery, encompasses as a primary component the relationship of the instructor (teacher, professor, trainer) and the student (client, trainee, mentor, intern).

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As educators move towards models of instruction that are increasingly taking place in non face-to-face settings, it is important to remember that an approach that intentionally emphasizes that relationship becomes more crucial the less time that teachers and students spend in the same physical space.

This chapter serves four primary purposes: The first is as a review of Rogers's basic humanistic approach towards how humans grow and change. The second section of this chapter examines Rogers's specific ideas about education, his *Freedom to Learn* (1969, 1983) series, and other writing and theoretical ideas. The third section of this chapter gives a brief outline of some of the most recommended practices in online learning, specifically in regard to the relationships between instructors and students, students and the classroom community as a whole, and students and the material being studied. Finally, these best practices are compared and contrasted with the views of Rogers and recommendations for practice in online education will be presented.

BACKGROUND

Carl Rogers and Humanism

Carl Ransom Rogers (1902-1987) was born in Oak Park, Illinois. His father bought a "gentleman's farm" essentially to keep the children away from the influences of city life, and it was on this farm that Rogers became interested in scientific breeding of chickens and other farm animals that became the basis for his interest in research later in life (Rogers, 1961; Patterson, 1973). Although he considered a career in the ministry and attended Union Theological Seminary, Rogers eventually became disenchanted with the ministry and decided to pursue psychology as a vocation and avocation.

It is interesting to note that Rogers's first interests in psychology were kindled at Teacher's

College, Columbia University, and although he became most well known as a psychologist, this interest in education and child development would be a theme he would return to throughout the rest of his academic career (Rogers, 1961; Patterson, 1973).

As Patterson (1973) reported, "It was during the years at Rochester that Rogers began to question the effectiveness of the traditional directive, or "the-therapist knows-best," approach to counseling or psychotherapy" (np). The non-directive approach he developed earlier in his career came to fruition in one of the seminal volumes of psychology: *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory* (1951).

Human Personality and Development as Revealed in the Process of Therapy

The cornerstone of Rogers's humanistic psychology is concerned with the relationship between the client (which Rogers used intentionally instead of the previously used "patient") and the therapist. As Rogers studied Freud and other psychologists in his training, he became concerned with the idea that therapy seemed much more focused on the doctor rather than the patient. His 1951 classic (with Dorfman, Gordon, and Hobbs) *Client-Centered Therapy* proposes ideas Rogers clarified and focused in a 1959 article of the same name.

This relationship can be summarized as follows:

"We have hypothesized that, if the therapist can provide three definable conditions in his relationship with the client and if the client can perceive to some degree the presence of these conditions, then therapeutic movement will ensue. These three conditions are the therapist's congruence or genuineness, unconditional positive regard, a complete acceptance; and a sensitively accurate empathetic understanding" (Rogers, 1959, p. 185).

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