

CONSTRUCTIVISM & STUDENT CENTERED LEARNING

5. CARL ROGERS & THE FREEDOM TO LEARN

5.1. Background Information

Carl Ransom Rogers was an influential American psychologist and among the founders of the humanistic approach, or client centered approach, to psychology. Rogers is widely considered to be one of the founding fathers of psychotherapy research and was honored for his pioneering research with the Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1956. The person centered approach, his own unique approach to understanding personality and human relationships, found wide application in various domains such as psychotherapy and counseling (client centered therapy), education (student-centered learning), organizations, and other group settings. For his professional work, he was bestowed with the Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Psychology, by the APA, in 1972. In a recent study conducted in 2002, referencing six criteria such as citations and recognition, Rogers was found to be the sixth most eminent psychologist of the 20th century and second, among clinicians, only to Sigmund Freud.

Rogers presented his theory of learning in *Freedom to Learn*, in 1969. In this landmark work, he characterized two types of learning and described them as defining opposite ends of a continuum of meaning, feeling, and relevance. One end of the continuum he represented by the following poignant observation. At one end of the scale is the kind of task psychologists sometimes set for their subjects with the learning of nonsense syllables. To memorize such items as *baz, ent, nep, arl, lud* and the like, is a difficult task. Because there is no meaning involved, these syllables are not easy to learn and are likely to be forgotten quickly. We frequently fail to recognize that much of the material presented to students in the classroom has, for the student, the same perplexing, meaningless quality that the list of nonsense syllables has for us. This is especially true for the underprivileged child whose background provides no context for the material with which he is confronted. But nearly every student finds that large portions of his curriculum are for him, meaningless. Thus education becomes the futile attempt to learn material

which has no personal meaning. Such learning involves the mind only. It is learning which takes place from the neck up. It does not involve feelings or personal meanings and it has no relevance for the whole person.

In contrast, he described the other end of the continuum in terms of significant, meaningful experiences, which are not easily forgotten. When the toddler touches the warm radiator he learns for himself the meaning of the word, “hot”. He has learned a future caution in regard to all similar radiators and he has taken in these learnings in a significant, involved way which will not be soon forgotten. Likewise the child who has memorized “two plus two equal four” may one day in his play with blocks or marbles suddenly realize, “Two and two *do* make four!” He has discovered something significant for himself, in a way which involves both his thoughts and feelings. Or the child who has laboriously acquired reading skills is caught up one day in a printed story, whether a comic book or an adventure tale, and realizes that words can have a magic power which lifts him out of himself into another world. He has now really learned to read.

There are ten principles of learning that Rogers abstracted from his own experience. They are outlined and summarized below;

- 1. Human beings have a natural potentiality for learning.** They are curious about their world, until and unless this curiosity is blunted by their experience in our educational system.
- 2. Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for his own purposes.** A somewhat more formal way of stating this is that a person learns significantly only those things which he perceives as being involved in the maintenance of or the enhancement of his own self.
- 3. Learning which involves a change in self-organization, in the perception of oneself, is threatening and tends to be resisted.** For example, why has there been so much furor, sometimes even lawsuits, concerning the adolescent boy who comes to school with long hair? Surely the length of his hair makes little objective difference. The reason seems to be that if a teacher or administrator, accept the value which he places on non-conformity then it threatens the value which they have placed on conforming to social demands. If they permit this contradiction to exist, then they may find themselves changing, because they will be forced to a reappraisal of some of their own values.

4. Those learnings which are threatening to the self are more easily perceived and assimilated when external threats are at a minimum. The boy who is retarded in his reading already feels threatened and inadequate because of this deficiency. When he is forced to attempt to read aloud in front of the group, when he is ridiculed for his efforts, when his grades are a vivid reflection of his failure, it is no surprise that he may go through several years of school with no perceptible increase in his reading ability. On the other hand, a supportive, understanding environment and a lack of grades, or an encouragement of self-evaluation, remove the external threats and permit him to make progress because he is no longer paralyzed by fear.

5. When threat to the self is low, experience can be perceived in differentiated fashion and learning can proceed. When the learner is in an environment in which he is assured of personal security and when he becomes convinced that there is no threat to his ego, he is once more free to move forward in the process of learning.

6. Much significant learning is acquired through doing. Placing the student in direct experiential confrontation with practical problems, social problems, ethical and philosophical problems, personal issues, and research problems, is one of the most effective modes of promoting learning.

7. Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process. When he chooses his own directions, helps to discover his own learning resources, formulates his own problems, decides his own course of action, lives with the consequences of these choices, then significant learning is maximized.

8. Self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner, feelings as well as intellect, is the most lasting and pervasive. We have discovered this in psychotherapy, where it is the totally involved learning of oneself by oneself which is most effective. This is not the learning which takes place only from the neck up. It is a gut level type of learning which is profound and pervasive. It can also occur in the tentative discovery of a new self-generated idea or in the learning of a difficult skill, or in the act of artistic creation such as a painting, a poem, or a sculpture. It is the whole person who lets himself go in these creative learnings. An important element in these situations is that the learner knows it is his own learning and thus can hold to it or relinquish it in the face of a

more profound learning without having to turn to some authority for corroboration of his judgment.

9. Independence, creativity, and self-reliance are all facilitated when self-criticism and self-evaluation are basic and evaluation by others is of secondary importance. If a child is to grow up to be independent and self-reliant he must be given opportunities at an early age not only to make his own judgments and his own mistakes but to evaluate the consequences of these judgments and choices.

10. The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change. If our present culture survives it will be because we have been able to develop individuals for whom change is the central fact of life and who have been able to live comfortably with this central fact. It means that they will not be concerned, as so many are today, that their past learning is inadequate to enable them to cope with current situations. They will instead have the comfortable expectation that it will be continuously necessary to incorporate new and challenging learnings about ever changing situations.

5.2. Carl Rogers' Ideal Classroom Environment

Carl Rogers' work led him to believe that teachers should seek to create emotionally warm, supportive environments in which they worked collaboratively with their students to achieve mutual goals. In such environments, he suggested, students came to love learning. His beliefs, expressed in his book *Freedom to Learn*, were underpinned by years of experience as a counsellor and supported by research evidence. Rogers is commonly viewed as the most influential psychologist in American history, the founder of client centered (non-directive) therapy and the modern day father of humanistic education. In *Freedom to Learn*, Rogers also revealed his antipathy towards traditional, transmission teaching. He wrote: "It seems that to most people, teaching involves keeping order in the classroom, pouring forth facts usually through lectures or textbooks, giving examinations and setting grades. This stereotype is badly in need of overhauling".

He pointed out how students preferred learning environments in which they were engaged in collaborative learning activities, peer teaching, carrying out their own inquiries and classroom talk that required multiple levels of thinking. In such

environments, he saw teachers more as facilitators of learning. But while he fervently believed in teachers giving students freedom to learn, he was not suggesting doing away with the teacher's expert contribution. He believed it was vital that teachers always provided enough limits and requirements (support and challenge in today's terms) to structure activities. Although Rogers' work was first published over forty years ago, his ideas are just as relevant today. His emphasis on student well-being is also echoed in current initiatives, such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL). Overall, his work demonstrated that pedagogy can only be enacted through human relationships.

Rogers also listed five defining elements of significant or experiential learning:

1. **It has a quality of personal involvement** – Significant learning has a quality of personal involvement in which the whole person in both his feeling and cognitive aspects is in the learning event.
2. **It is self-initiated** – Even when the impetus or stimulus comes from the outside, the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within.
3. **It is pervasive** – Significant learning makes a difference in the behavior, the attitudes, and perhaps the personality of the learner.
4. **It is evaluated by the learner** – The learner knows whether it is meeting his need, whether it leads toward what he wants to know, or whether it illuminates the dark area of ignorance he is experiencing.
5. **Its essence is meaning** – When such learning takes place, the element of meaning to the learner is built into the whole experience.

5.3. The Role of the Teacher as Facilitator

Rogers' theory of learning also included ten principles that define the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning. Rogers summarized this role by stating that the primary task of the teacher is to permit the student to learn, to feed his or her own curiosity. Rogers' ten principles of facilitation are complementary to his ten principles of learning. Together they form a human learning theory that emphasizes learner agency, connection, and affect. These ten principles are as follows:

1. The facilitator has much to do with setting the initial mood or climate of the group or class experience.
2. The facilitator helps to elicit and clarify the purposes of the individuals in the class as well as the more general purposes of the group.
3. He relies upon the desire of each student to implement those purposes which have meaning for him, as the motivational force behind significant learning.
4. He endeavors to organize and make easily available the widest possible range of resources for learning.
5. He regards himself as a flexible resource to be utilized by the group.
6. In responding to expressions in the classroom group, he accepts both the intellectual content and the emotionalized attitudes, endeavoring to give each aspect the approximate degree of emphasis which it has for the individual or group.
7. As the acceptant classroom climate becomes established, the facilitator is able increasingly to become a participant learner, a member of the group, expressing his views as those of one individual only.
8. He takes the initiative in sharing himself with the group, his feelings as well as his thoughts, in ways which do not demand nor impose but represent simply a personal sharing which students may take or leave.
9. Throughout the classroom experience, he remains alert to the expressions indicative of deep or strong feelings.
10. In his functioning as a facilitator of learning, the leader endeavors to recognize and accept his own limitations.