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CARL ROGERS

(1902-1987)

Fred Zimring¹

Carl Rogers was one of the most prominent American psychologists of his generation. He had an uncommon view of human nature, which led him to originate a unique psychotherapy and gave him a different view of education.

His career was something of a contradiction. As a person and as a psychologist he was widely admired. In several surveys of American psychologists, he was named as one of the most influential. His therapeutic method, however, generated much controversy. His method reflected his view of human nature. This view is that there is, in the person, an ability to actualize the self, which, if freed, will result in the person solving his or her own problems. The therapist was not to be an expert who understood the problem and decided how it should be solved. Rather, the therapist should free the client's power to solve personal problems. This position about therapy was controversial because it was contrary to the usual professional assumption that the client needs an expert to solve his or her problems.

This same view of human nature shaped his writings about education. Here he asserted that the student has interests and enthusiasms, and the task of the teacher was to free and to aid these interests and enthusiasms.

It may help in understanding the cast of Rogers' thinking to know that he was born into a family with many Midwestern farm values. Some of these values had to do with the pioneering attitudes towards independence. These values may have led to his belief that people will act in ways that benefit themselves, if they are freed from having to learn the way the society dictates. The farm experiences taught Rogers about the inevitability and strength of growth in nature. Intellectually, he emerged from a background that culminated in the experiential ideas of John Dewey and in the liberal Protestant theological beliefs of Paul Tillich and others, which were concerned with the internal dimensions of religious experience.

His lifelong interest in nature and growth led to his choosing agriculture as his undergraduate major at the University of Wisconsin. After several years in college, he decided that his future lay in religious work. In 1924, he went to the Union Theological Seminary where, after two years, he came to feel that he could not work in a field where he was required to believe in a specific religious doctrine.

He then went to the Teachers College, Columbia University, where he was strongly influenced by William H. Kilpatrick's courses in the philosophy of education and where he came into contact with John Dewey's emphasis on experience as the basis for learning. Rogers became a clinical psychologist, specializing in child guidance, and then spent twelve years at the Rochester Child Guidance Clinic. At the start of his work at Rochester, he was immersed in providing psychological services in the traditional manner. Near the end of his time there he began to question the current authoritative methods of diagnosing the problem and guiding the patient. Instead, he began to see that his clients had a better knowledge than himself about what was important and they could be relied on to determine what direction to take after receiving therapy.

In 1940, Rogers moved to Ohio State University. He began to realize that he had developed a distinctive point of view about psychotherapy which he presented in *Counseling*

and psychotherapy (1942). From the very beginning at Ohio State University he made his teaching more experiential, requiring the students in his courses to determine the direction of the course and its content.

He moved to the University of Chicago in 1945 where his growing awareness of his viewpoint as a distinctive type of therapy resulted, in 1951, in the publication of *Client-centred therapy*. In a chapter on ‘Student-centred teaching’, he discussed the evolution of his thinking about teaching as paralleling the change in his thought about psychotherapy. Part of this evolution was from being ‘non-directive’ to emphasizing the importance of attitudes rather than techniques. His first principle in this chapter was: ‘we cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning’. He saw the leader as setting the mood, clarifying the purposes for the members of the class and serving as a flexible resource for them.

The central conditions

In ‘The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change’ (1957) Rogers made a major statement of his ideas about psychotherapy. Later he extended these ideas to education. Of the six conditions described, three are central. One was that ‘the therapist be congruent or integrated in the relationship’. This therapist congruency, also termed therapist genuineness or transparency, refers to the therapist’s awareness of the way he/she experiences the relationship and his/her attitude to the client. This condition also refers to the therapist’s willingness to communicate about this experience if it stands in the way of the two other central conditions.

Another of these central conditions was that ‘the therapist experiences an unconditional positive regard for the client’. Rogers said: ‘to the extent that the therapist finds himself as experiencing a warm acceptance of each aspect of the client’s experience, as being part of that client, he is experiencing unconditional positive regard.’

The last central condition was that ‘the therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference and endeavours to communicate this experience to the client.’ Rogers says: ‘To sense the client’s private world as if it was your own, but without losing the “as if” quality—this is empathy, and this seems essential to therapy.’

It should be emphasized that these conditions were thought to be sufficient as well as necessary. What was not necessary should be noted. Nothing other than the above conditions was seen as important. The therapist does not have to understand the client’s personality or problems, nor guide the client to solving the problem. It is enough if the therapist is genuine and unconditionally accepting, while empathetically understanding the client.

Writing in 1959 in ‘Significant learning in therapy and in education’, he stated a set of conditions in education that paralleled those that he had stated for psychotherapy. These were that significant learning can occur only to the degree that the student is working on problems that are real to him; that significant learning can be facilitated only to the degree that the teacher is genuine and congruent. In addition, ‘the teacher who can warmly accept, who can provide unconditional positive regard, and can empathize with the feelings of fear, anticipation and discouragement which are involved in meeting new materials, will have done a great deal toward setting the conditions for learning.’

After a dozen years at Chicago, Rogers went to the University of Wisconsin and, in 1963, on leaving that university, he also left academia. Until his death in 1987 he was a member of independent institutes, first the Western Sciences Behavioural Institute and then the Center for the Studies of the Person. It was in this period that his writings, especially his 1969 book *Freedom to learn*, began to reflect his broad interests in education.

In this book, revised and republished as *Freedom to learn for the 80s* (1983), he emphasized the process of seeking knowledge. He said that, because of the continually changing atmosphere in which we live, we are:

faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world (p. 104).

Rogers described his goals in these words:

I see the facilitation of learning as the aim of education, the way in which we develop the learning man, the way in which we can learn to live as individuals in the process. I see the facilitation of learning as the function which may hold constructive, tentative, changing, process answers to some of the deepest perplexities which beset man today (p. 105).

As to how to achieve this goal, Rogers explains:

We know ... that the initiation of such learning rests not upon the teaching skills of the leader, not upon his scholarly knowledge of the field, not upon his curricular planning, not upon his use of audio-visual aids, not upon the programmed learning he utilizes, not upon his lectures and presentations, not upon an abundance of books, although each of these might at one time or another be utilized as an important resource. No, the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner (p. 105-06).

The first of these attitudinal qualities which facilitate learning (and these are the three core conditions mentioned above as they apply to education) is 'realness' in the facilitator of learning. About this quality Rogers states:

Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes is realness or genuineness. When the facilitator is a real person being what he is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or facade, he is much more likely to be effective. This means that the feelings which he is experiencing are available to him, available to his awareness, that he is able to live these feelings, be them, and able to communicate them if appropriate. It means that he comes into a direct personal encounter with the learner, meeting him on a person-to-person basis. It means that he is being himself, not denying himself.

Seen from this point of view it is suggested that the teacher can be a real person in his relationship with his students. He can be enthusiastic, he can be bored, he can be interested in students, he can be angry, he can be sensitive and sympathetic. Because he accepts these feelings as his own, he has no need to impose them on his students. He can like or dislike a student product without implying that it is objectively good or bad or that the student is good or bad. He is simply expressing a feeling for the product, a feeling that exists within himself. Thus, he is a person to his students, not a faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement, nor a sterile tube through which knowledge is passed from one generation to another (p. 106).

The second group of these attitudes has qualities of prizing, acceptance and trust. About these Rogers comments:

There is another attitude which stands out in those who are successful in facilitating learning. I have observed this attitude. I have experienced it. Yet it is hard to know what term to put to it, so I will use several. I think of it as prizing the learner, prizing his feelings, his opinions, his person. It is a caring for the learner, but a non-possessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in his own right. It is a basic trust—a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy. Whether we call it prizing, acceptance, trust or some other term, it shows up in a variety of observable ways. The facilitator who has a considerable degree of this attitude can be fully acceptant of the fear and hesitation of the student as he approaches a new problem as well as acceptant of the pupil's satisfaction in achievement. Such a teacher can accept the student's occasional apathy, his erratic desires to explore the by-roads of knowledge, as well as his disciplined efforts to achieve major goals. He can accept personal feelings which both disturb and promote learning—rivalry with a sibling, hatred of authority,

concern about personal adequacy. What we are describing is a prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentials. The facilitator's prizing or acceptance of the learner is an operational expression of his essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism (p. 109).

As to the third attitudinal quality, Rogers observes:

A further element which establishes a climate for self-initiated, experiential learning is empathic understanding. When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reaction from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased.

This kind of understanding is sharply different from the usual evaluative understanding which follows the pattern of 'I understand what is wrong with you'. When there is a sensitive empathy, however, the reaction in the learner follows something of this pattern, 'at last someone understands how it feels and seems to be me without wanting to analyze me or judge me. Now I can blossom and grow and learn.'

This attitude of standing in the other's shoes, of viewing the world through the student's eyes, is almost unheard of in the classroom. One could listen to thousands of ordinary classroom interactions without coming across one instance of clearly communicated, sensitively accurate, empathic understanding. But it has a tremendously releasing effect when it occurs (p. 111-12).

Rogers recognized that these attitudes are difficult to achieve. He goes on:

it is natural that we do not always have the attitudes I have been describing. Some teachers raise the question, 'But what if I am not feeling empathic, do not, at this moment, prize or accept or like my students. What then?' My response is that realness is the most important of the attitudes mentioned. It is not accidental that this attitude was described first. So if one has little understanding of the student's inner world, and a dislike for his students or their behaviour, it is almost certainly more constructive to be real than to be pseudo-empathic, or to put on a facade of caring.

But this is not nearly as simple as it sounds. To be genuine, or honest, or congruent, or real, means to be this way about oneself. I cannot be real about another, because I do not know what is real for him. I can only tell if I wish to be truly honest what is going on in me (p. 113).

As an example, Rogers mentions an incident in which a teacher reacted to the 'mess' of a sixth grade artwork class. She told her class: 'I find it maddening to live with this mess! I'm neat and orderly and it is driving me to distraction.' Discussing this incident Rogers said:

suppose her feelings had come out differently, in the disguised way which is much more common in classrooms at all levels. She might have said: 'You are the messiest children I've ever seen! You don't care about tidiness or cleanliness. You are just terrible!' This is most definitely not an example of genuineness or realness, in the sense in which I am using these terms. There is a profound distinction between the two statements which I would like to spell out.

In the second statement she is telling nothing of herself, sharing none of her feelings. Doubtless the children will sense that she is angry, but because children are perceptively shrewd they may be uncertain as to whether she is angry at them, or has just come from an argument with the principal. It has none of the honesty of the first statement in which she tells of her own upsetness, of her own feeling of being driven to distraction.

Another aspect of the second statement is that it is all made up of judgements or evaluation, and like most judgements, they are all arguable. Are these children messy, or are they simply excited and involved in what they are doing. Are they all messy, or are some as disturbed by the chaos as she?

Rogers understood the difficulties in achieving these attitudes. He stated it as follows:

Actually the achievement of realness is most difficult, and even when one wishes to be truly genuine, it occurs but rarely. Certainly it is not a matter of the words used, and if one is feeling judgmental, the use of a verbal formula which sounds like the sharing of feelings will not help. It is just another instance of a facade, of a lack of genuineness. Only slowly can we learn to be truly real. For, first of all, one must be close to one's feelings, capable of being aware of them. Then one must be willing to take the risk of sharing them as they are, inside, not disguising them as judgements, or attributing them to other people (p. 114).

Principles for learning

Rogers abstracted a number of principles about learning. These principles (Rogers, 1969, p. 114) are:

1. Human beings have a natural potential for learning.
2. Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for his/her own purposes, when the individual has a goal he/she wishes to achieve and sees the material presented to him/her as relevant to the goal, learning takes place with great rapidity.
3. Learning which involves a change in self-organization in the perception of oneself is threatening and tends to be resisted.
4. Those learnings which are threatening to the self are more easily perceived and assimilated when external threats are at a minimum.
5. When the threat to the self is low, experience can be perceived in differentiated fashion and learning can proceed.
6. Much significant learning is acquired through doing.
7. Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.
8. Self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner feeling as well as intellect is the most lasting and pervasive.
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.
10. The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and to incorporate into oneself the process of change.

Some idea of what Rogers learned about methods of facilitating learning can be obtained from his guidelines for facilitating learning (Rogers, 1969, p. 164).

1. It is very important for the facilitator to set 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.

Rogers goes on to say about the facilitator: 'If he is not fearful of accepting contradictory purposes and conflicting aims, if he is able to permit the individual a sense of freedom in stating what they would like to do, then he is helping to create a climate for learning.'

3. The facilitator relies upon the desire of each student to implement those purposes which have meaning for the student, as the motivational force behind significant learning.
4. The facilitator endeavours to organize and make easily available the widest possible range of resources for learning.
5. The facilitator regards himself/herself as a flexible resource to be utilized by the group.
6. In responding to expressions in the classroom group, the facilitator accepts both the intellectual content and the emotionalized attitudes, endeavouring to give each aspect the approximate degree of emphasis which it has for the individual or the 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/her views as those of one individual only.
8. The facilitator takes the initiative in sharing himself/herself with the group feelings as well as thoughts in ways which neither demand nor impose, but represent simply a personal sharing which students may take or leave.
9. Throughout the classroom experience, the facilitator remains alert to the expressions indicative of deep or strong feelings.

Rogers goes on to say that these feelings should be understood and the empathic understanding should be communicated.

10. In his functioning as a facilitator of learning, the leader endeavours to recognize and accept his/her own limitations.

Rogers, in his explanation of this principle, explains how these limitations affect facilitation and also what the facilitator should do when his attitudes are not facilitative of learning. Rogers says that:

He [the facilitator] can grant freedom to his students to the extent that he is comfortable in giving such freedom. He can only be understanding to the extent that he actually desires to enter the inner world of the students. He can only share himself to the extent that he is reasonably comfortable in taking that risk ... There will be many times when his attitudes are not facilitative of learning. He will find himself being suspicious of his students. He will find it impossible to accept attitudes which differ strongly from his own. He will be unable to understand some of the students' feelings which are markedly different from his own. He may find himself angry and resentful of student attitudes toward him and angry of student behaviours. He may find himself feeling strongly judgmental and evaluative. When he is experiencing attitudes which are non-facilitative, he will endeavour to get close to them, to be clearly aware of them, and to state them just as they are within himself. Once he has expressed these angers, these judgements, these mistrusts, these doubts of others as something coming from within himself, not as objective facts in outward reality, he will find the air cleared for a significant interchange between himself and his students. Such an interchange can go a long way toward resolving the very attitudes which he has been experiencing, and thus make it more possible for him to be more of a facilitator of learning.

Applying Rogers' principles

These principles have been put to use in a number of educational settings, such as programs aimed at humanizing medical education, attempts to change the school system in California, teacher education and a graduate program in nursing at the Medical College of Ohio.

In the latter program, in using Rogerian principles to establish a master's degree in nursing, there were two recurring issues. One had to do with the faculty sharing power and responsibility. In some cases the faculty did not respect their own limits and granted students freedoms with which the faculty was not comfortable. For example, several faculty members had allowed students to negotiate out of activities that the faculty considered essential to the student's learning. At times, the faculty felt hurt when the students did not recognize or value what the faculty had to offer. The authors of the article (Chickodonz et al., 1986) describe this experience:

Considerable effort was required to create an environment in which students could express themselves openly to faculty. The faculty's mere verbalization of a safe environment did not make it safe in the students' experience. Honesty and openness were difficult to achieve. This was especially evident in handling students' confrontations with the faculty. As students became empowered, they were often angry with the faculty about course requirements (and grading criteria).

Gradually it became clear that the person-centred approach was not an idealistic, utopian educational form. What was discovered to be true was that the person-centred approach is essentially a person-to-person relationship between teacher and students.

What was required was that the experience of both the teacher and the learner be acknowledged.

The second major issue was that of evaluating students and giving them grades for the course. As part of an academic institution, the faculty was expected to evaluate students. The usual type of evaluation by faculty was not seen by students as sharing with them the power and the responsibility for their learning. Gradually, faculty discovered strategies for sharing decisions in the evaluation process with students. One was to be very clear about the criteria for evaluation before the papers were assigned and written. Another was to comment on a draft and allow the students to rewrite papers before they were given a grade. Yet another was to use peer evaluation in grading the papers.

There were three effects of this program on students. One was that the students came to accept more responsibility for their learning and became more self-directed. In addition, students felt less helpless and exercised more power in the academic setting. A third effect was that students established more interdependent relationships with faculty.

Frequently these Rogerian educational principles proved to be successful. However, sometimes school administrations and entrenched bureaucracies opposed the changes that were taking place and terminated some programs. Rogers found that the politics of education and of the educational establishment were an important determinant of the success or failure of the use of these principles.

In addition to the reports on the success or failure of the programs where these principles have been tried out, research has also been conducted on the effects of the facilitating attitudes of the teacher on the students. In studies by Aspy and Roebuck, empathy, congruence, and positive regard were measured by trained raters who rated audio tapes of the classroom interactions. In addition to rating for facilitating attitudes, the tapes were also rated for Flander's interaction analysis and for Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives.

Aspy and Roebuck report (1969):

In one study involving 600 teachers, 10,000 students (from kindergarten to grade twelve) of teachers who were trained to offer high levels of empathy, congruence and positive regard were compared with control students of teachers who did not offer high levels of these facilitative conditions. The students of high facilitative teachers were found to:

1. Miss fewer days of school during the year;
2. Have increased scores on self-concept measures, indicating more positive self-regard;
3. Make greater gains on academic measures, including both math and reading scores;
4. Present fewer disciplinary problems;
5. Commit fewer acts of vandalism to school property;
6. Increase their scores on I.Q. tests (grades K-5);
7. Make gains in creativity scores from September to May; and
8. Be more spontaneous and use higher levels of thinking.

In addition, these benefits were cumulative; the more years in succession that students had a high functioning teacher, the greater the gains when compared with students of low functioning teachers (Rogers, 1983, p. 202-03).

Aspy and Roebuck measured the effects of the facilitating attitudes on reading, mathematics and English achievement. They trained some teachers in these facilitative attitudes and then compared the achievement of the students taught by the trained and untrained teachers. Table 1 reports the results of one typical study.

TABLE 1. Mean differences in adjusted gain¹ between students of trained (facilitative) teachers and untrained teachers.

Grade level	Reading achievement	Math achievement	English achievement
1-3	+10.88 ²	Not tested	Not tested
4-6	+ 3.66 ³	+15.44 ²	+18.66 ²
7-9	+ 2.96 ³	+ 4.10 ³	+11.75 ²
10-12	+ 1.56 ⁴	+ 1.94 ⁴	+ 0.96 ⁵

NOTES

1. Covariates were intelligence quotient and pre-test standing.
2. p<.001
3. p<.01 - In favour of control (no training) group.
4. p<.05 + In favour of experimental (training) group.
5. Not significant.

In summary, we have seen that Rogers was concerned with the motivation and self of the student rather than with how the student should be taught. Rogers assumed that, in the student, there remains an innate capacity for growth. This self-actualizing process, which, if the process is freed, will lead to self-initiation and learning which is more rapid, more thorough and lasting than traditional learning.

These self-actualizing processes are freed when a teacher has particular attitudes. That is, these processes are freed, and self-initiated learning occurs, when the congruent teacher

unconditionally prizes and responds empathetically to the world of, to the interests and enthusiasms of, the student. The history of the programs where these teacher attitudes have been attempted indicates that it is difficult for teachers and administrators to change their attitudes, to share their power and responsibility and to trust the intrinsic motivation of their students to learn. The history of these programs also indicates that, where teachers and administrators change their attitudes, the student's motivation, learnings and behaviour is improved.

Note

1. Fred Zimring (United States of America). Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1958, having worked with Carl Rogers in the Counseling Center. Member of the faculty of the University of Chicago until 1970, then moved to the Department of Psychology of Case Western Reserve University until the present. Theoretical interests are concerned with the causes of changes resulting from client-centred therapy; research interests are on the cognitive effects of describing feelings. Co-editor of the *Person-centred journal*, a periodical concerned with the client-centred approach.

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