

# Person-Centered Principles in Graduate Education

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## Abstract

This paper highlights the major points in Rogers' 1967 article *Graduate Education in Psychology: A Passionate Statement* and demonstrates how the article is still relevant to current graduate programs. Rogers' (1967) implicit assumptions are explored in-depth and his alternative assumptions are presented. As graduate students, we provide specific examples from our own personal experiences to illustrate Rogers' comments. Student-centered learning, self-determination theory, and Montessori-type programs will be discussed in relation to the implementation of Rogers' alternative assumptions. This paper presents a personal view of the current state of graduate education, discusses how educational programs could be shifted to be more focused on student-directed learning, and proposes creating training programs that would yield independent, open, and curious psychologists.

## Person-Centered Principles in Graduate Education

“We are doing an unintelligent, ineffectual and wasteful job of preparing psychologists, to the detriment of our discipline and society” (Rogers, 1967, p. 55). Carl Rogers' statement is as true today as it was over 40 years ago when he originally wrote the words. His article, *Graduate Education in Psychology: A Passionate Statement*, focused on how

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graduate programs were ineffective in preparing students for the future in their field of study. Of particular interest to psychologists, he specifically chose to review psychology programs and revealed a set of unchanging, erroneous assumptions. Considering the article contained important information for the development of future psychologists, it is interesting to note the *American Psychologist* initially rejected the article for publication. Rogers distributed the unpublished manuscript to interested readers and stated, "... I have *never* [emphasis added] written anything which has aroused so much interest" (1964, p. 417). In 1967, he was finally successful in publishing the article in a different journal, the *Clinical Psychologist*.

After the publication of the 1967 article, Rogers wrote *Freedom to Learn* (1969), where he fully articulated these new assumptions and principles for learning. Included in the book are principles for facilitators, so individuals can consider suggestions on how to be a teacher in a student-centered classroom. Over time, some variations of this type of education have been attempted by a number of individuals.

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (2010) have developed a theory of motivation called self-determination theory (SDT) that bears some strong similarities to the person-centered approach (Patterson & Joseph, 2007). Like Rogers, they believe individuals have the capacity to support their own "natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways. SDT has been researched and practiced by a network of researchers around the world" (Deci & Ryan, 2010). Deci, Ryan, and colleagues have applied SDT to education and hope this way of teaching individuals can lead to some type of future educational reform (e.g., Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004).

Montessori programs are another closely related example of ways in which students are free to choose their own areas of interest. These educational programs were developed by Maria Montessori in the 1960s. The Montessori method of teaching requires that the teacher view a child as "having an inner natural guidance for his or her own perfect self-directed development" (Standing, 1998, p. 169). The teacher, also known as a director or guide, has a specific role, which involves watching over a child's environment, then removing obstacles interfering with the child's natural development (Standing, 1998). This method has been successfully implemented with younger children, but

it seems as though these types of methods or ways of educating are generally lacking in higher education.

As early as the late 1930s, researchers, most notably Aspy and Roebuck and the Tauschs, have sought ways to approach classroom instruction from a person-centered way in order to improve the quality of learning for students (Cornelius-White, 2007; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). In the past two decades, the American Psychological Association published documents on learner-centered psychological principles (APA Task Force, 1993; APA Work Group, 1997). These evidence-based principles provide a way for psychological knowledge to be integrated with education in order to facilitate learning. Since then, more research has been conducted. Cornelius-White and Harbaugh (2010) have written about learner-centered instruction from a person-centered approach. Their model integrates Rogers' core conditions with previous research about learner-centered instruction.

Considering the advances in research and theory, it would be expected that Rogers' set of implicit assumptions based on the graduate programs in psychology would have directly impacted these programs. This paper will review Rogers' implicit assumptions in graduate education. Drawing from personal experiences, we will use the principles outlined by Rogers specifically in his 1967 paper and compare the assumptions to similar assumptions that exist in our current psychology graduate program. Using a combination of Rogers' alternative assumptions, and considering current relevant literature on the subject, we will explore suggestions for improvements in graduate education, based on our experiences. We hope that by applying Rogers' alternative assumptions and integrating current information about student-centered learning, some insights can be made as to how our experience of "graduate education in psychology" could be improved.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 1**

*"The student cannot be trusted to pursue his own scientific and professional learning" (Rogers, 1967, p. 67).*

With his first assumption, Rogers highlighted the lack of trust placed in students by faculty members. These members displayed what Rogers called "mistrustful guidance" by assigning work to students, supervising the work until completion, then providing an evaluation

(Rogers, 1967, p. 56). The students were rarely if ever “set free” in their programs to pursue areas of personal interest (Rogers, 1967, p. 56).

In our experiences, we found this assumption holds today, and in some ways can be compared to Rogers’ conditions of worth (Rogers, 1959). Students may begin to believe that receiving good grades translates into being a good psychologist. In our graduate program, grades are highly emphasized and their outcome can affect students’ competence and confidence. However, we have found grades themselves can be deceiving and should not be viewed as true measures of students’ performance. Depending on several variables, such as the course selected and professor teaching, there is a wide range in the amount of work students complete. The range varies from virtually no work or effort to extremely hard work and study. If students receive an identical passing letter grade in each of these types of classes, there is no distinction between which was harder and what type of learning was achieved. Yet these classes hold equal weight on students’ transcripts, where grades could act as conditions of worth.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 2**

*“Ability to pass examinations is the best criterion for student selection and for judging professional promise” (Rogers, 1967, p. 56).*

Rogers noted that using tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and the Miller Analogies Test (MAT) can only *hope* to aid in the selection of students who would be best suited for graduate education. When these are used as the primary methods of selection, he stated the results could unintentionally focus more on individuals who have greater test-taking abilities. Rogers believed examination-passing ability to be a useful skill, albeit one that emphasizes rote learning rather than originality of thought (Rogers, 1969).

Today most graduate schools require similar testing results, although there are exceptions. One criterion that seems to be universally used in selecting graduate students is an individual’s grade point average (GPA). This method of selection could limit the results to those students who have acquired specific test-taking skills. While well-developed test-taking skills may be useful, these do not translate

into clinical ability. We have heard students, supervisors, and faculty state they do not necessarily possess strong exam-taking skills, but these individuals are highly successful clinicians and psychologists. In contrast, it is not difficult to imagine individuals who excel at taking examinations but may be lacking in a number of clinical skills. There remains a problem of finding the exact criteria that would qualify an individual to be a successful graduate student, as there are often no alternative testing options available for individuals who may struggle with formal or traditional examinations. This is a particular problem beyond graduate education, as the current licensing procedure involves test-taking as well.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 3**

*“Evaluation is education; education is evaluation” (Rogers, 1967, p. 56).*

The need for evaluation becomes a theme that Rogers revisits many times in his article. Rogers boldly stated, “It is incredible the way this preposterous assumption has become completely embedded in graduate education in the United States” (Rogers, 1967, p. 56). He noted faculty would deny they believe evaluation equates to education, but their behavior often showed otherwise. Rogers believed the overwhelming number of examinations given to students during their graduate career, aiming to continually evaluate, may actually feel threatening to students as well as damaging to their learning process (Rogers, 1967).

This principle has certainly remained unchanged since Rogers’ article. In our experience, graduate education can feel like one long examination process. The importance of evaluation has become common in education at all school levels. Christopher Caldwell (2009) discussed the damage that George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 has caused in public education. He stated schools have been “colonized by the Kaplan philosophy” of giving students an edge by teaching to the test instead of providing students the tools necessary for meaningful learning (Caldwell, 2009, p. 7).

Clearly, students do not have the freedom to choose the ways in which they could or should be evaluated. In psychology graduate programs, evaluation often comes in the form of papers as well as traditional exams. While papers have the appearance of more freedom

in creativity, that is not necessarily true. In our experience, the papers are so strict in form, structure, and content that they begin to resemble a fill-in-the-blank essay.

Nearly all students must be subjected to standard examinations that leave little room for creativity in learning and often lead to what some have referred to as the cram and flush, or the cram, pass, forget effect (Jendrzeczak, 2008). Students can become so overwhelmed with continual examinations that they will simply shut down, procrastinate studying until shortly before an exam, then cram all of their studying into a short period of time, frequently resulting in them forgetting the majority of the information once the examination is complete.

#### **Implicit Assumption No. 4**

*“Presentation equals learning: what is presented in the lecture is what the student learns” (Rogers, 1967, p. 57).*

Rogers noted intelligent faculty members continuously fall prey to this misguided assumption. He used a quote from a graduate student to illustrate this point:

“... not many of the students feel that they are learning anything at all ... huge amounts of material are thrown at you and you are expected to regurgitate most of it on a test and then supposedly you have learned something. You may indeed have gained some separated facts about psychology, but none of them can be integrated in any coherent way” (Rogers, 1967, p. 57).

Problems associated with this assumption seem to be a common complaint among graduate students today. We have observed faculty who hold students responsible for all material covered in a lecture without the opportunity to explore facets of the subject more applicable to the students' future careers. In our opinion, the learning process would be more beneficial if the courses allowed for more freedom in content within that particular subject area. For example, one of the authors took an undergraduate course that allowed the freedom to explore any DSM-IV disorder that interested the students. This author chose pedophilia because of an interest in child sexual abuse and a desire to explore it from a different angle. The papers completed during this course led to a research interest that would not

have been possible if the professor imposed limits on the topic material.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 5**

*“Knowledge is the accumulation of brick upon brick of content and information”*  
(Rogers, 1967, p. 57).

In explaining this assumption, Rogers remarked psychology has shown us the most meaningful learning takes place when the motives of individuals are taken into account. Graduate training, however, uses a brick-by-brick approach to education, assuming each individual must take fundamental courses in sequence whether or not they are of interest to the student at the time. Rogers used a poignant example noting Harvard University was one of the first universities to do away with the pre-med major for undergraduates. The university found students who had more freedom in what they wanted to major in actually performed better by the third year in medical school than those students who had followed a strictly pre-medical major during their undergraduate years (Rogers, 1967).

This is another assumption that appears still active in psychology graduate schools of today. After reviewing the course structure in several local psychology schools, it seems there is only slight flexibility in the sequence in which courses are taken. Specific groupings of courses must be completed by all students, whether or not they are interested in the subject matter, before beginning a track towards three sequential practicum experiences. However, some schools do provide more flexibility and freedom in choosing the order of classes and practicum experiences. In these programs, the students are allowed to choose which order of experiences would best suit their interests and facilitate learning.

Recognizing the rigid structure that students are forced to abide by is important because students have few options available to change the system. In our experience, we have found that when students feel pressured to adhere to unwanted structure, they can either leave the program for one that may offer more freedom, fail a class and fall behind in their linear progression through the program, or choose to do what possibly occurs most often: quickly determine what a particular course will require and do the least amount of work

that yields a passing grade. This is where the previously mentioned cram-and-flush method can be employed, resulting in students gaining little to nothing from the experience. These options are the unfortunate reality of students today, who feel bound by unwanted pressure or structure within their graduate programs.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 6**

*“The truths of psychology are known” (Rogers, 1967, p. 58).*

Rogers believed this assumption needed little clarification. He had experienced both some departments that operate dogmatically and some that were much more divergent in their thinking about psychological truth. Rogers stated further that when these attitudes exist in any psychology department, true science cannot exist and only a pseudo-science can result (Rogers, 1967).

Fortunately, this seems to be less of a problem in our experience. Our particular institution employs a diverse set of faculty, many of whom come from different backgrounds and theoretical inclinations. In our experiences, we have seen this divergence firsthand (during the same semester), where one professor taught about the utility of using psychological instruments, such as the Rorschach ink blot test, in court proceedings and another professor could not refrain from recommending literature titled: “What’s wrong with the Rorschach?” These opinions, though at odds with one another, help contribute to a psychological climate of openness within our graduate program.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 7**

*“Method is Science” (Rogers, 1967, p. 58).*

In psychology departments, Rogers observed a well-constructed procedural method for carrying out an experiment was of greater value than the ideas the experiment attempted to investigate. He acknowledged the need for competence in study design but advocated for individuals to continually develop by using their creativity in discovering new approaches to problem solving (Rogers, 1967).

Rogers’ articulation of this assumption seems prescient given the subtle divide existing between clinical psychologists who have earned their Ph.D. and those who have earned a Psy.D. In our



experiences, it seems Ph.D. psychologists are more strongly in favor of quantitative research data and interested in yielding results for things considered to be directly measurable, such as today's movement towards evidence-based treatments. However, psychologists who have earned a Psy.D. seem more sympathetic to qualitative research methods, although they are often regarded as a less valid approach to psychological inquiry. For example, one author was told by a professor (with a Ph.D.) that her research proposal didn't have "any value" because it was a qualitative study on pedophiles that could not result in any quantitative data.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 8**

*"Creative scientists develop from passive learners" (Rogers, 1967, p. 58).*

Rogers emphasized two key points related to this assumption: the impact of educational procedures on students' development and the value of creativity. Rogers cited Anne Roe, who concluded an inadequate valuing of problem-solving skills, a general devaluation of wild or silly ideas, and restrictions upon curiosity can adversely affect students' development as scientists (Roe, 1963). Rogers then mentioned the value of creativity by citing MacKinnon, who has done extensive investigations on creativity and believes:

... knowledge is the result of playing with what we know ... a knowledgeable person in science is not, as we often wont to think, one who has an accumulation of facts, but rather one who has the capacity to have sport with what he knows, giving creative reign to his fancy... (MacKinnon, 1963).

In our experiences, we resonate with the idea that knowledge is developed by actively playing with ideas and testing their validity. In this manner, we have found students can learn facts but then also have the ability to discuss a topic with depth and understanding. As mentioned earlier, it seems the case that some faculty members still believe in the value of rote memorization and regurgitation on examinations. This learning strategy does not seem to produce true learning and is certainly not synonymous with knowledge. We also resonate with the emphasis Rogers placed on the value of creativity in the development of meaningful learning. As a whole, graduate

programs could be improved with a continued openness to creativity in individuals as students progress through their graduate training.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 9**

*“Weeding out’ a majority of the students is a satisfactory method of producing scientists and clinicians” (Rogers, 1967, p. 59).*

Rogers felt manpower was wasted when students, who were carefully selected into graduate programs, never finished their degrees. He also noted many programs seem content with this idea. In contrast, Rogers believed graduate psychology programs should take on the responsibility for “growing psychologists” from the students they have so carefully selected. He viewed any departure from the program as a failure on their part rather than an inherent failure in the student. Rogers advocated for the use of exit interviews of students who leave their education early, so psychology programs can be accountable for problems including, but not limited to: issues with selection of a particular student, failure in teaching, or failure of the program to provide a stimulating learning environment for the student (Rogers, 1967).

This assumption seems to have validity today as well. The cost of education has been steadily increasing, and the number of schools available has multiplied as well. In our experience at a professional school that offers a doctoral degree in clinical psychology (Psy.D.), we have noticed negative effects when a school operates like a business, with students as customers. Students who drop out of our program are rarely interviewed as to the reasons why they left. Yet, the business of the school continues with the admission of a new class, each year hoping to reach higher enrollment or meet a certain quota. The idea that a graduate program failed to meet a student’s needs seems to be low on the list of reasons why a student discontinues in the program. There is more of a focus on the recruitment of new students (or “numbers”) rather than time spent on needed improvements in the graduate program whose purpose could be the retention of the current, carefully selected students.

A local psychology graduate student observed a presentation for her school that displayed the students depicted as cartoon-like dollar signs with feet. This observation clearly demonstrates the level

of importance the program places on individuality and student need versus earning potential.

### **Implicit Assumption No. 10**

*“Students are best regarded as manipulable objects, not as persons” (Rogers, 1967, p. 59).*

Rogers presented a very interesting dynamic common in many schools: the awkward relationship that develops between students and faculty, with faculty serving as mentors and evaluators simultaneously. Rogers felt the impersonal relationship has two main causes. The first cause is the behaviorist philosophy, which views people as machines. Rogers noted that when students are treated like objects, the consequence is low morale. This leads to student competition, where students themselves begin to treat colleagues as objects. The second cause is the notion that it is nearly impossible to be close to an individual whose primary role in a relationship is to judge and evaluate. Rogers said students are often put in a “double bind” in which it is as if a faculty member says, “I welcome you to a warm and close interpersonal relationship—and when you come close I will clobber you with my evaluation” (Rogers, 1967, pp. 59-60).

In our experience, this final assumption is connected to the previous one as it relates to the way professional schools in psychology attempt to behave as businesses. This business-like attitude naturally creates a feeling of detachment from intimate relationships, and, unfortunately, students are receptive to the idea that they are consumers of a product. However, there are faculty who fall outside the norm of strict judges or evaluators. We have found person-centered professors universally fall into this unique category. On the other hand, there are professors students know they should be careful around, because these faculty members have power to offer their evaluation or opinion of a student, occasionally preventing students from moving forward in the program for seemingly arbitrary reasons. We cannot agree more with Rogers that there is vast importance in students being able to have close interpersonal relationships with faculty, who can serve as mentors, leaders, and wonderful teachers throughout a student’s graduate career.

It is interesting to note that although this article was written over 40 years ago, many of these assumptions remain unchanged, and some feel as though they have worsened (i.e., schools behaving like businesses). Rogers postulated when students were given no freedom in their academic endeavors, over time they may have craved more of the same. He also thought original, curious, autonomous students actively pursuing their own goals can be disturbing to have around, so they were then weeded out or stifled. These are just possibilities; further research is required to determine why graduate programs seem to hang on to these outdated ideas (Rogers, 1967).

### **Rogers Alternative Assumptions**

To discuss the alternative assumptions Rogers listed in this 1967 article in depth would necessitate writing a separate paper altogether. For the purposes of this paper, we will simply list Rogers' assumptions. At the time, Rogers viewed these assumptions as a "skeleton" for further development, and he hoped that they might stimulate some discussion (Rogers, 1967). It is safe to say the assumptions listed below did facilitate much discussion among students, faculty, and graduate programs in general. Rogers' 11 alternative assumptions are listed below:

1. The objective of the graduate program in psychology is to develop psychologists who can make original, significant, and continuing contributions primarily to the science of psychology and also to the professional practice related to this science.
2. The selection of graduate students is best based on three criteria: originality, intelligence, independence of thought. More adequate methods of assessing the first and third are needed.
3. Other things being equal, the best background training for a psychologist is a broad education including the humanities, arts, and sciences.

4. Students have the potentiality for learning, developing, making sensible educational choices. This potentiality can be released by a suitable psychological climate, whose principal ingredients are freedom and stimulation.

5. Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is seen by the student to have relevance for his own purposes and development.

6. Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process, choosing directions, making his own contributions, living with the consequences of his choices.

7. The time of the faculty member is best spent in providing resources which stimulate the desire to learn rather than in planning a guided curriculum.

8. Much significant learning is through doing. Placing the student in direct experimental confrontation with research problems, clinical problems, ethical and philosophical problems, is one of the most effective modes of promoting learning.

9. Learning is most likely to occur in the students when the faculty member approaches the interaction as learner rather than teacher.

10. Creativity of thought is facilitated when self-criticism and self-evaluation are basic, and evaluation by others is relegated to a position of minimal importance.

11. A meaningful certification for the PhD is based on the quality of the research completed by the graduate student, the quality of his professional work, and the quality of the other products of his learning. This certification would best be made by representatives of psychology as a whole, rather than by the student's own faculty. (Rogers, 1967, p. 61).

The ideas in this list seem hard to disagree with, but as Rogers said, the realization of such concepts would require psychology graduate programs to throw out most of their current assumptions and procedures, thus requiring radical change. He also stated a detailed plan for the implementation of these ideas would best be carried out by a group of individuals who shared a vision for this type of educational process (Rogers, 1967).

### **Discussion**

Rogers' 1967 article spurred research of student-centered and learner-centered principles and practices in education (Cornelius-White, 2007) showing effectiveness across geography, subject, and age level for cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. Additionally, there are many published examples of these principles being utilized in a classroom setting with beneficial results. For example, in one learner-centered classroom, Abel and Campbell (2009) found "students appreciated the cooperative learning approach, found assessment to be meaningful, and reported authentic learning" (p. 16). Also, Thomas (2001) and Cornelius-White (2005) wrote about creating classes in which students were involved in shaping the course. With this approach, it was up to the students to find their motivation and facilitate their own learning experiences. One student commented, "For the first time in my life, the type of learning I yearned for was taking place.... One class has not changed me, but it has started the ball rolling within. I am hungry for more similar classes" (Thomas, 2001, p. 561). The student's comments demonstrate the value of student-centered education.

After 40 years and an abundance of additional research, one might expect Rogers' assumptions, based specifically on psychology graduate programs, to have impacted the programs he targeted. Unfortunately, in our experience, this is far from accurate. While individual professors may take it upon themselves to approach education in this manner, our experience indicates the overall graduate program does not. Professors are not encouraged to embody these principles and, in some cases, may be chastised for doing so. For example, the Client-Centered Theory and Therapy course in our

program used to be a pass/fail course. The course was designed this way to alleviate concern over grades so the student could focus on education. Recently, administration decided this course may no longer be offered as pass/fail and must have an evaluative mark. While there are likely many factors that contributed to this change, it does not appear that preservation of a student-centered learning environment was at the heart of this decision.

Our review of Rogers' (1967) implicit assumptions about graduate education and the fact that many of these assumptions are still true today could serve as evidence for the need for a paradigmatic shift and educational reform. Rogers' (1967) revolutionary paradigm he began in his therapeutic work changed the field of psychology, shifting the locus of power from the therapist to the client. Given time, it would not be difficult to imagine that Rogers' (1967) notion of student-centered learning becoming more widespread in graduate programming. This could have the potential to revolutionize our current graduate education in psychology as we know it.

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