

A Learner's Guide to Person-Centered Education

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Abstract

The author provides an orientation to person-centered education for use by educators with their students. The orientation is informed by reviews of both theory and research on person-centered education and is relevant to secondary, undergraduate, and especially graduate programs. A brief review of the effectiveness of person-centered education and its primary goals is followed by a one-page handout. The handout is intended to provide a basis for discussion and informed consent to facilitated learning.

The Review

I have recently been immersed in the theory and research on person-centered education, reviewing all available research and major theoretical statements by Rogers and others (Cornelius-White, in press a, in press b, 2005, 2006a; Cornelius-White & Brown, 2006; Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2005; Cornelius-White & Godfrey, 2004; Cornelius-White, Hoey, Cornelius-White, Motschnig-Pitrik, & Figl, 2004). While there are many explanations of person-centered education in the literature, there is not a succinct, recent orientation for students in person-centered classes. This article gives a brief summary of person-centered research and introduces a simple orientation of a one-page handout that can be used at the beginning of person-centered classes. The orientation is for use in secondary, undergraduate and graduate settings, including counseling and psychotherapy programs. Graduate students may prefer the entire article for a short but more in depth summary of related research.

Person-centered educational ideas have been researched since at the least the late 1920s with the two periods of densely concentrated studies taking place in the 1970s and the last ten years (Cornelius-White, in press b; Cornelius-White & Brown, 2006). These ideas have gone by various names including student-centered, person-centered, humanistic, affective, democratic (Rogers, 1951), Montessori (1964), invitational (Purkey & Stanley,

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1991), nondirective (Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2005), indirect (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977), interactional (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977), and learner-centered (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). While these methods of teaching and learning vary in many ways, they share a concern for the development of the whole student rather than primarily a student's academic achievement. Rogers (1969, 1983) and Cornelius-White (in press a, 2006b; Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2006) are explicit about how this educational concern for the development of human potential is pivotal for the survival of both humans and the world.

The explicitly person-centered and learner-centered educational traditions also share a concern for the positive and facilitative relationship between teachers and students. From a meta-analysis of 119 studies of diverse quantitative methodologies, overall person-centered/learner-centered education ($r = .31$) (Cornelius-White, 2005) has been shown to be more successful than traditional ($r > .20$) or innovative education ($r = .20$) (Fraser, Wahlberg, Welch & Hattie, 1986; Hattie, 1999) in most contexts from pre-school to graduate study. (Fraser et al. (1986) refer to traditional education as the average of thousands of heterogeneous "normal" classrooms, while innovative education refers to thousands of diverse methods that were specifically created to improve learning.) Person-centered education has comprehensive beneficial effects, impacting not just students cognitive outcomes ($r = .29$), but also social, behavioral, and emotional outcomes ($r = .32$) (Cornelius-White, 2005). Person-centered education appears to impact basic learning skills, like math ($r = .36$), verbal ($r = .34$), and aptitude ($r = .27$) more than achievement as measured on high stakes tests ($r = .11$) (Cornelius-White, 2005). The effects on non-cognitive outcomes far exceed the average innovative classroom (Cornelius-White, 2005). Participation ($r = .55$) and critical/creative thinking ($r = .45$) are very strongly affected (Cornelius-White, 2005). Other beneficial impacts include increased attendance ($r = .25$), motivation ($r = .32$), respect ($r = .25$), self-efficacy ($r = .35$), and social skills ($r = .32$) (Cornelius-White, 2005). Person-centered education is also valuable for teachers' well-being in school and has been explored with others involved in schooling, including parents, principals, and counselors (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977; Rogers, 1983).

The one-page orientation handout is an introduction designed to create a basis for informed consent to a facilitative style of teaching. Informed consent is a required part of facilitation within therapy contexts (Corey, 2005) but is often not explicitly included in educational, training, and supervisory contexts. This simple handout is intended to be a starting place for a discussion. Flexibility and adaptation to teachers', students' and

community members' unique needs is central to person-centered education. Hence, the following orientation offers tentative descriptors. It is intended to highlight the role of learners and learning in a person-centered classroom and not to serve as a set of guidelines to limit practice.

Person-centered education is vital to the success of democracy (Rogers, 1951; 1980), environmental sustainability (Cornelius-White, in press a; Rogers, 1977), comprehensive student success (Cornelius-White, in press b, in press b), and the rapid adaptations necessary in a constantly changing world (Rogers, 1969, 1983). I hope that the following handout assists students in becoming more oriented toward what to expect and not expect within a person-centered classroom so that we can all develop together to our optimal and cooperative potential.

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The Handout for photocopying

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1. Your teacher cares about you.

Person-centered education is based upon the formation of facilitative relationships, characterized by empathy, respect, and sincerity. Your teacher, or facilitator as he or she may be called, cares about both *your* goals and how *you* are doing in the class. This means your intellectual understanding of the class *content* but also your *process* of learning—the way you learn, how it makes you feel, who it connects you to and how it challenges you to behave differently. Your teacher will attempt to understand what you say, and as a result, you will probably participate much more than you usually do in classes. Your teacher is interested not only in what and how you are learning, but all of who you are even he or she though will probably focus most activities on learning relevant to your class.

2. Your teacher shares with you.

Person-centered education shares power and responsibility between teachers and students. You may be asked to decide what you will learn and/or how you will learn it. You may help evaluate your progress as well as that of your peers. Your facilitator may discuss your progress with you, believing that your shared perspective is better than only his or hers and certainly better than only a test score. You may be asked to share your perspective of how your facilitator can also learn, especially how he or she may learn how to help you and your peers to become the best you can be. You and your facilitator will share resources which will aid your learning. These may include books, activities, and computers, but also people and organizations within your community.

3. You help yourself learn.

With sharing comes responsibility. You will learn to understand critically and initiate your own learning process. The process of improving how you learn is equally or more important than what you learn. This class will very likely expand how you think and broaden your horizons as an agent of change in your self and your surroundings. You will probably feel more satisfied with your learning as you'll play an active role.

4. You and your friends help each other learn.

Not only will you be sharing responsibility with your facilitator, you will also become involved in cooperative learning tasks. You will probably get to know your classmates better in this class than you normally do. This usually includes not just the formation of a couple of friendships, but a real expansion of who you interact with. You will probably learn a lot by listening and interacting with people who are different from you.

5. Your teacher has limits.

Your facilitator has responsibilities not just to you and your classmates, but also to him or her self and to a broader system. Your facilitator has requirements regarding time, activities, space, and other rules that exist within your school and/or profession. These external requirements sometimes mean that a compromise must be reached between what and/or how you might like to learn and what will be tolerated. Your facilitator may also have personal limits to what he or she will be able or willing to do. Everyone has these personal boundaries, but everyone's boundaries are slightly different. Your teacher will try to be transparent when a compromise due to an external or personal limitation must be reached.