

**Review of**  
*On Becoming an Effective Teacher: Person-centered  
teaching, psychology, philosophy, and dialogues with Carl  
R. Rogers and Harold Lyon*

**By Carl R Rogers, Harold C Lyon and Reinhard Tausch**  
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Without your twirling it, the earth will spin.  
Without your teaching him, the child will learn.

Carl Rogers playfully tweaks a song from *My Fair Lady* to neatly summarise his view of “overly responsible” teachers (Rogers, Lyon & Tausch, 2013, p. 64) in one of four previously unpublished dialogues between himself and Harold Lyon that form a core component of this intriguing book about person-centered education. The book is organised into four parts, each of which begins with a dialogue. It is a privilege to read the conversation between the two men - especially to be reminded of Rogers’ strong, sure voice. In the dialogue in Chapter 6, for example, Rogers explores “the heart of the person-centred approach to teaching and learning” (p. 61), and shows why “teachers and curriculum specialists” are nervous about this open approach to education. His position challenges their authority when he says that “the locus of evaluation lies definitely in the learner” (p. 62).

Because the book begins with a dialogue, I was drawn in quickly. I could feel the warmth of the relationship between the two men, Rogers the generalist and Lyon primarily focused on detail. It is a good mix. It is also quite wide-ranging, not only about “teaching” but also about such left-field but stimulating discussion points as the Leboyer birthing method and older people as an overlooked and excellent source of teachers. I was occasionally taken aback by how intimately Lyon writes, which I found beautiful and moving. I found myself identifying very closely with him at times.

There are rich seams here for anybody wishing to explore the deeper complexities of the person-centered approach to education. A couple of years ago, I presented about person-centered education to international colleagues and was asked the question, “What do you mean by “realness” as a teacher?” Although I gave an answer, I felt afterwards that it fell very short of what I thought it was. Well, here, Lyon catches the idea beautifully by saying that when we are authentic or genuine in the classroom, we begin to allow people to be. I think this also points to the overall tenor of this book, which at its heart is about the central purpose of education as a way of allowing people to be. In a speech, Rogers addresses the meaning of being real, showing how empowering it is for the teacher/facilitator herself, by saying, “There is basically nothing to be afraid of when I present myself as I am” (p. 72).

His extensive background in high-level educational administration informs Lyon's perspective on what may well be the central dilemma in promoting and developing the person-centered approach in education – that it is *person*-centered, and education happens inside bureaucratic institutions, which are *system*-focused. As Rogers says in one of the dialogues, “There is plenty of evidence that we have been much more successful in facilitating change in individuals than in the large system of which they are a part. I think we have a great deal to learn in this area of changing systems” (p. 85). Lyon is very clear on the way forward: learn the system, build mutual support groups, recognise that not everything needs changing, set mutual goals – and be patient. As a practical matter, however, do person-centered educators have that kind of patience with(in) systems? Carl admits his own difficulty being patient in an organisation (p. 86), something that resonates to my own experience. However, it is a real strength of the book that Lyon explores the issue comprehensively – and indeed one of the most unexpectedly interesting chapters in the book is that on person-centered management and leadership, where Lyon's knowledge of educational organisations and bureaucracies comes to the fore.

As my research interest is in person-centered education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I was very excited when I heard about this new publication, but I also had an immediate question for the book in the prominent use of the word “teacher”. Rogers challenged the very concept of “teaching” on numerous occasions, including here, where he says: “...teaching is a vastly overrated function and only the facilitation of learning is important.” (p. 17). So, how does Lyon square with Rogers' use of the word “teacher” and the picture we likely all still have in our heads of the baggage that goes with it (empty vessels, chalk and talk, prescribed curriculum, imposed evaluation, the technology of the examination...)?

I'm not entirely sure he does. The exemplar he draws on is the non-profit venture, Teach for America, whose mission is ostensibly to “eliminate [the injustice of the cycle of poverty] by finding, training, and supporting individuals who are committed to equality and placing them in high-need classrooms across the country” (<http://www.teachforamerica.org>). Unfortunately, I do not see much specific evidence of the person-centered approach in Teach for America. I am sure participating in it is a rewarding experience for

many of the teachers and for many of their charges, but it seems to me that this model of education does not emerge from the world of the students, but is imposed from above, as described by Paolo Freire as the “banking concept of education” (2000, p. 51). Freire’s work was greatly admired by Rogers and is acknowledged at length in *Carl Rogers on Personal Power* (1977). Both Freire and Rogers had a vision of education where teachers and students are *jointly* responsible in a process in which all grow.

Lyon states, “It has taken us nearly fifty years to learn that school performance is mostly dependent upon one thing: effective teaching” (p. 37). Surely this is the very opposite of the non-directive person-centered approach, and dependent on measures of student performance that are not meaningful. He sees “effectiveness” measured by “high student performance” (p. 37), which is presumably “measured” by an imposed evaluation. He also advocates rewarding teachers based on student “performance” (p. 39), surely deepening the current baleful situation where students “cheat” in order to get better exam grades because they have a significant, perhaps crucial, impact on their future life courses. I believe this suggestion will only serve to encourage teachers to become complicit in the same enterprise, lest their incomes suffer. Once again, it seems to me that this does not describe person-centered education. Lyon says “...if students are achieving, one can hardly argue with that important measure of success” (p. 40). One can. Especially as such ideas have led to the ludicrous insistence by Ofsted, the official body for inspecting schools in the UK, that teachers mark their students’ work every 20 minutes in order to “prove” that learning is continually happening (<http://goo.gl/30Y2ro>).

Freire talks of “education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination” (2000, p. 81). Teaching is a political act and my concerns about Lyon’s desire to link teachers’ pay to student achievement are not assuaged by the list of 44 “non-profit” organisations supporting Teach for America, a list which includes wealthy bankers, CEOs, and entrenched political dynasties all of whom seem to fit pretty well into Freire’s oppressor class and thus, in my mind, are not likely to be the most discerning advocates of person-centered education.

Nevertheless, Lyon does talk throughout the book of the current rightist mood in education and its “rigid, behavioristic, punitive

governance” (p. 53). Such qualms do not detract from the unique contribution this book makes to person-centered education, especially in terms of pulling together little-known but important empirical research over the last 50 years on the approach in education. Lyon has done a wonderful job of summarising, comparing and contrasting important contributions to research in person-centered education, which are spread throughout the book, and summarised as follows (in chronological order):

1. David Aspy and Flora Roebuck (with Cheryl Blalock Aspy) update their chapter in Rogers’ and Allender’s (1983) *Freedom to Learn* (“Researching Person-centered Issues in Education”), which reports on the huge three-year research project they carried out in the 1970s under the aegis of the National Consortium for Humanizing Education (NCHE). “Results of the large field study strongly supported the contention that when teachers improved their person-centered behaviors, students enhanced their classroom performances on a variety of measures” (p. 111).
2. Reinhard Tausch (with Anne-Marie Tausch) very thoroughly replicated the Aspy and Roebuck research in Germany (again in the 1970s and summarised in *Freedom to Learn*) and reported similar results. They extended their investigations to include counsellors, parents and, interestingly, textbook materials.
3. John Hattie’s *Visible Learning* (2009) is not research into person-centered education per se; rather it is one of the largest collections of evidence-based research about what works best in education (15 years’ research covering 80 million students, using 800 meta-studies and 50,000 smaller studies). Hattie reports that almost anything works, so the trick is to find out what works best – and not everything here looks person-centered. However, one important aspect reported under “Teacher-student relationships” is the development of person-centered “skills” such as “listening, empathy, caring and having positive regard for others” (Hattie, 2008, p. 118).
4. Jeffrey Cornelius-White and Adam P. Harbaugh’s *Learner-Centered Instruction: Building Relationships for Student Success* (2010) is another meta-analysis, but this time of

- person-centered teaching. The research covers significant studies from 1948 to 2004 and reports that person-centered methods are “highly associated with student success” (p. 5).
5. Harold Lyon reports on his own (with others) research in two German medical Universities from 2009-2011, which builds solidly on the earlier Aspy-Roebuck research, but focuses on low-cost interventions to encourage teachers to become more person-centered (which he shows is very possible).
  6. Chapter 14 reports an interesting small study from Germany with self-reports on empathy, but I felt that it was not as teacher-focused as the others for true comparison here.

Although the emphasis varies and some of the terminology differs among these empirical studies, all agree that there is a strong positive correlation between teachers’ levels of empathy, genuineness, and acceptance and student development. Students learn more when the person-centered attitudes are present.

While it is beyond the scope of this book, I would add that current neuroscience research reinforces these findings, particularly in regard to the integration of the cognitive and affective domains. For instance, Lyon states that with the person-centered approach “you can integrate the cognitive with the affective” (p. 11). Researchers such as Damasio and Immordino-Yang prove that not only can you integrate them, but that you have little choice, as our emotions act as a kind of “rudder”, allowing us to guide judgment and action. Indeed, it is those cognitive aspects used most heavily in education – learning, attention, memory, decision-making, motivation – that are profoundly affected by emotion and subsumed within the process of emotion: “neither learning nor recall happen in a purely rational domain, divorced from emotions” (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007, p. 9).

Overall, then, I feel that the strength of this book is in its diversity. If you’re not so interested in the educational aspects of the person-centered approach per se, the previously unpublished free-ranging dialogues are worth getting hold of in their own right. Rogers himself was very clear on the need to build a rigorous empirical base for person-centered education, so Lyon has done the approach a very fine service by synthesising the major research in the approach. The generous appendices include a definitive bibliography and instruments for collecting empirical data (I would have loved to have seen

Reinhard Tausch's fifteen-item questionnaire included as well, building towards something like a toolkit for researching person-centered education that other researchers might use, but perhaps that is something others might do.)

I felt a great warmth for the writer and admire his knowledge and experience of person-centered education; Lyon is quite clearly, often beautifully, touchingly, person-centered to his core, as can be seen when he describes the person-centered approach at ground level. The book clearly shows the need for person-centered education, a movement perhaps, but I am not convinced that *Teach for America* is its exemplar. However, the person-centered approach, as shown in this book, is not a set of pedagogical techniques, it is a way of being and a way of beginning to allow people to be. In his conclusion, Lyon asks "Is person-centered teaching an idea whose time has come?" (p. 191). I honestly cannot say I see much evidence of it when I look around (at least at the University level). If it is there, it is well hidden.

But Lyon issues a call to arms: "We need to join together in mutual support groups to amass our energies, power, and creativity into that critical mass which is needed to bring about a transformation or a renaissance in education" (p. 56). The combination of the dialogues and the neglected empirical work provide a much-needed bridge between the high point of "progressive" or "humanistic" education and our own times of systems-centered, corporatist-managerialist education. So, perhaps, the pendulum that Rogers saw swinging to the right in his time (p. 62) is about to swing back to persons in our socially networked age. It is my belief that it must and I am heartened by these words from Carl Rogers:

When education is transformed to a process built around the worth and dignity and potential of each individual child, it will be so changed from our present-day concepts that our wildest fantasies could not approach its likeness. I believe the context for that transformation is building in people throughout this planet; at all levels of awareness, we're coming ever closer to the surfacing of that context and the changes it will make in our world. (p. 150)

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