Learning by Being: A student-centered approach to teaching depth psychology.

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Abstract

This article addresses a way to facilitate significant experiential learning environments. Humanistic principles elucidated by Carl Rogers, combined with the author’s thirty years of personal classroom experience, serve as a template for creating powerful and rewarding classroom events. The fundamental importance of these environments is to inspire and encourage students to use education as a building block to become fully functioning beings.

Keywords: Holistic education, student-centered learning, experiential learning environments

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Introduction

Carl Rogers began his 1983 revision of Freedom to Learn in the 80’s with the chapter entitled, “The Challenges of Present Day Teaching.” In it he spoke of the impact of bureaucracy and the intrusion of outside regulations; student dissatisfaction and feelings of unhappiness in their learning and academic relationships; and what he calls “the declining school” created by drastic and dramatic budgetary cuts and constraints. Sadly, most of the issues Rogers believed to be problematic then remain problematic still. Political agendas and corporate oriented training models touting “best practices” have impacted the independence of a liberal...
arts education. Teaching to the test and the reduction of funding for creative courses that are not in accordance with external authorities are being streamlined and deleted from curricula in major universities.

With the budgetary cutbacks for universities and curricular change to accommodate them, whole person learning is given short shrift in academic environs. Whole person learning stimulates students’ curiosity and supports and inspires their motivation, as well as creates an environment of joined learning where students can easily integrate their growing knowledge. All aspects of being human are involved in holistic, or whole person education.

The current culture regarding education is perhaps more grim than Rogers imagined. Some now say that going to college is a waste of time when the Internet offers so much information about everything. Many people do not recognize the difference between gaining information and becoming educated. “Hybrid” courses (in-class and on-line), self-study on-line courses, and other reductions of classroom “seat time” are being implemented as cost cutting measures across the nation.

Without sensitivity to holistic methods many on-line educational options are content specific without attention to other human sensibilities. Granted the same issue is true in traditional settings, yet the energy and contact of fellow students and/or the warmth and sharing of a facilitator can bring in other factors not easily experienced with self-instruction on-line. For example, something that is often missing in self-instruction and other on-line courses is the use of empathy to create relationships and mutual caring that brings depth and meaning to learning. Another example is the exchange that comes with sharing experiences rich with self-disclosure and stories of our humanity. Laughter and caring are harder to replicate with a machine!

Finding solutions to offer high quality, affordable education is tantamount. Regardless of the delivery system, on-line or in person, it is my belief that student centered holistic educational methods are important and need to be included in the education transformation that is occurring nationally. Facilitating opportunities for people to be fully functioning individuals support them to be engaged in questioning and growing, as well as to learn to trust...
themselves and their own decision-making capacities. When people are internally strong and trust their own ability to discriminate, problem solve, communicate, and become proactive, society and the culture as a whole are positively influenced. The value of whole person learning shows up in well-informed, compassionate, impassioned people, who impact their communities as educated parents, leaders and engaged citizens of the world.

To cultivate a culture of freedom to learn, to be and to become, to create and to find meaning, educators must be willing to integrate student-centered holistic models into their classrooms.

If we value independence, if we are disturbed by the growing conformity of knowledge, of values, of attitudes, which our present system induces, then we may wish to set up conditions of learning that make for uniqueness, for self-direction and for self-initiated learning. (Rogers, 1983, p.83)

Using Rogers’ five elements involved in facilitating holistic educational experiences as the framework, this manuscript offers an example of the development and structure of a student-centered course that provides a significant learning environment

Environment for Learning

Rogers (1983) discusses elements of significant experiential learning in the classroom that come about when the teacher “allows learning to happen.” When teachers have the freedom to facilitate meaningful dialogue, engaged curiosity and creative imagination centered on developing the whole person, powerful learning occurs. Some of the elements of significant experiential learning Rogers noticed are: 1) It has the quality of personal involvement, meaning that cognition, feelings, personal meanings, are all equal aspects of being” in the learning event.” 2) It is self-initiated, the student experiences excitement and an engaged sense of discovery in her or his development. 3) It is pervasive. “It makes a difference in the behavior, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner.” 4) It is evaluated by the learner. 5) Its essence is meaning (p. 20). When significant experiential learning occurs, the element of meaning is unique and endemic to the entire experience.
Significant learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning.

When we learn in that way, we are whole, utilizing all our masculine and feminine capacities. (Rogers, 1983, p. 20)

When we can utilize all of our ways of knowing and value thinking, feeling, intuiting and reasoning as combined strengths, we are then operating from a holistic, or whole person paradigm.

**Helpful Qualities**

Rogers found that certain teacher-qualities assisted the teacher, or facilitator of learning, in developing and supporting significant learning environments. The attitudes he found most beneficial were: 1) the facilitator is real, and allows her or him self to seen as a person versus a role based on hierarchy. 2) There is a sense of acceptance, or non-possessive caring one has about the student, a “prizing” that is fundamental for deep learning to occur. 3) Empathic understanding that serves as the auger for a “sensitive awareness,” or the idea of the teacher “standing in another person’s shoes” that allows the learner to learn without judgment (Rogers, 1983, pp.121-126).

The spontaneous transparency of real personhood, whether facilitator or learner is powerful role modeling and can assist in deepening the overall learning environment. For example during one lecture about resilience and tenacity of the human spirit as seen in psychotherapy, I was taken over by emotions as I remembered a former client who overcame horrid atrocities to come to this country for asylum. So touched and taken were the students, rapt with attention and compassion, the room swelled with their empathy, for the client, themselves and me.

This unexpected outpouring of my own feelings turned out to be a pivotal shared experience among us all. The students reported feeling encouraged and supported to tell the stories that gripped their own human dilemmas and capacity to empathize and feel. It was a profound interchange that semester. Tom said it best, “This class brought aspects of my self that I had hidden to make it through the army, a bad marriage, and a debilitating on the job injury. It was
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liberating and truly educational to benefit others and myself by telling my story” (Tom. Personal communication, 2011).

When the learner shows up with a willingness to engage in the exchange with the facilitator, the material, and other students, relevant and dynamic integration and transformation occur (Hess, 2000). Last semester, out of a class of fifteen there were four men, three of who were over 50. Those older men modeled for that group of mostly young women (20 – 35) what conscious, kind, available and loving men look like. Because of their authentic sharing about how they were benefiting from the open and honest format of the class, those “guys” facilitated some truly liberating conversations. We talked about men and war, equality, living with integrity, wanting to be good fathers, being a man with a sensitive and open heart, and the limitations society and culture can impose on all human potential. The learning was many faceted and far reaching for us all.

Some Challenges

The attitude and resources of the environments in which we teach often, unfortunately, influence the possibility of a class such as the one described here and the several Rogers (1983) described in Freedom to Learn in the 80’s. My university has a historical connection with the fourth force of Humanistic Psychology including Carl Rogers’ involvement in the college’s early days. Student-centered teaching and learning methods are used at this liberal arts college. Even with the overall support of experimentation in the service of the students, still, the primary focus is on best practices. The end goal for most academic institutions seems to be competition, employability and taking one’s place as another cog in the wheel that is a large aspect of our consumer driven, success oriented culture.

Working within the corporate mentality that has infiltrated university settings has been one of the biggest challenges for me to overcome. Teaching using a facilitative framework has become harder to rationalize in the eyes of the administration. A recent occurrence has threatened the future of the course described herein as the school has decided it can no longer afford to mount boutique classes under twenty-five students. Cutting the class is further
legitimized as a balancing of my workload so I am available to teach other much larger courses.

Outside of undergraduate studies, I have received my advanced degrees from institutions that were student-centered and valued whole person learning. The teachers and mentors were stunning examples of people who lived from the potentiated self. They mirrored for me the impact of integrated, holistic learning.

My own meaningful academic relationships and experiences inspire and support me to continue to teach courses that are not always understood by others. For instance, at conferences people would accuse me of engaging in psychotherapy. All the reasons why holistic education is not therapy would be offered while simultaneously noticing the critic’s defensiveness about the topic. (What seems truer is that holistic education is not therapy in and of itself, but can have a therapeutic outcome (Hess, 2000).) Fortunately my training as a psychotherapist and integral psychologist did assist in navigating what were occasionally hostile academic waters. Personal education, professional experience, and the very positive response from learners in student-centered courses help me continue my efforts and inspire others to do it as well.

There are many faculty who continue to remain suspicious of any scholastic endeavor that includes feelings, spirit, or the body. Being connected to the strong lineage of other holistic educators is a fundamental aspect allowing me to continue bearing the torch for whole person education. It has been challenging, if not rewarding, teaching on this road less traveled.

**Learning by Being**

Alternatives to mechanistic, linear learning models are exemplified in the attributes of significant learning environments. The example course used for this article is called *Depth-Oriented Psychotherapies* (also known as *Depth Therapies*). In this experiential seminar the focus is on several modalities that are used to access and express the body, soul, and psyche in psychotherapy. We read and explore the ideas and theories of depth therapy using the techniques of several modalities. When we study Dora Kalff and
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Sandplay (2003), students complete one sand play and witness another's, then write an observation/comparison paper.

What is Sandplay? Sandplay is both a therapeutic technique and learning tool that emphasizes nonverbal, symbolic expression in sand. It is not unlike dream work in its ability to tap very deep levels of consciousness and provide healing and enlightenment. The client is given the possibility, by means of figures and the arrangement of the sand in the area bound by the sandbox, to set up a world corresponding to his or her inner state. In this manner, through free, creative play, unconscious processes are made visible in a three-dimensional form and a pictorial world comparable to the dream experience. Sandplay is evocative, playful, highly creative and is completely self-guided by the student/client.

A fundamental concept in understanding the work of C.G. Jung is that of Individuation (1963). Students are invited to explore their own individuation process, however they define it, through the creation of ten mandalas they then share with the class. Marion Woodman’s work with the Body and Ritual (1980) and D. W. Winnicott’s theory on Relational Space (1971), along with the wisdom and spirit of eastern and western indigenous cultures, offer us insight into methods of understanding the Self and are significant in our weekly explorations particularly in developing and performing rituals.

Many depth methods include the experience of non-verbal expression in the presence of a trained other. Students have opportunities to work with each other as both a client and therapeutic witness. A major focus of this course is on the inner life. It demands the student be an active participant in the ongoing inward experiences the class facilitates. In other words, the student must be willing to show up, do the reading, complete the projects and be a part of the significant learning circle this type of exploration inspires, evokes and supports.

Commitment

Significant classroom experiences begin with the knowledge that the course has the “quality of personal involvement” (Rogers,

It is this involvement that allows students to feel a part of something meaningful and worthwhile. A former student of the Depth Therapies class states, "To know that the other students were going to share and we were going to explore our inner lives with methods that have worked for master therapists for decades made me so happy to be part of this class" (Jenn. Personal communication, 2010). (All of the personal communication citations are from former students of the Depth Oriented Psychotherapies class.)

While Depth Therapies is designed to develop inter and intrapersonal awareness skills, significant experiential learning is not limited to the study of psychology. Earlier inquiry on the importance of student-teacher relationships (Rogers, 1983, Palmer, 1998, Hess, 2000) showed the viability of holistic methods across disciplines.

The course is usually comprised of 15 upper division psychology students, but students from other disciplines have completed it. An advantage of keeping the class small is to assist in developing trust and to allow each student enough time to participate fully in the in-class assignments. Classroom exercises support meaningful self-disclosure and experimentation with expressive modalities.

Developing the container (creating safety and support) for the work of the semester begins at the onset of class. We go over the syllabus answering questions, clarifying any misunderstanding about the course description, objectives, or the processes that will be part of the course. Short one-line humorous remarks pepper the introduction and reduce the stress of meeting strangers. Students usually feel it a coup to be in this class, so they arrive with a good deal of enthusiasm. Because students know from their peers that this class will bring up feelings and give room for exploring them, there is a willingness to make the commitment to do the introspective work necessary.

One of the most important aspects of creating an environment for significant experiential learning is a sense of security and trust. Self-disclosure is modeled by the instructor and teaching assistant if there is one. Frank conversation is encouraged about what is "appropriate" to bring to check-ins and other group activities.

Students ask for commitment from each other to develop a "safe zone" to really dive in and explore themselves through the course material. Attendance is very important as missed material is impossible to recapture, and the depth and cohesion of the group is more rapidly facilitated when everyone is present.

On the first day students are informed that this class will not be a "typical" learning experience. For *Depth Oriented Psychotherapies* the following quote gives insight to the process we might endeavor in the course:

> It takes courage to face one's emotional states directly and to dialogue with them. But therein lies the key to personal integrity. In the swamplands of the soul there is meaning and the call to enlarge consciousness. To take this on is the greatest responsibility in life. We alone can grasp the ship's wheel. And when we do, the terror is compensated by meaning, by dignity, by purpose. (Hollis, 1993, p. 108)

This quote stimulates conversation that acts as an icebreaker for the course. It also allows for discussion about how one self-discloses and becomes known to self and others.

Students are usually clear by the end of the first class about the level of personal participation that will be required in the course. My view is that it takes a certain degree of willingness to be vulnerable in a classroom setting for a course such as the one described here. This vulnerability is part of the personal involvement that Rogers addressed.

**A Responsibility for Learning**

Rogers (1983) said that significant experiential learning includes being passionately engaged in curiosity and discovery. He called it being "self-initiated." Becoming knowledgeable is a proactive process. Taking personal responsibility for one's learning makes for dynamic classroom energy and stimulates excitement as well as some trepidation. Every student, as well as the facilitator is challenged to be fully involved in the learning as their unique selves. There is an enthusiasm for learning when students feel empowered to utilize and develop their independence in thinking and

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feeling and are supported in their expression of each. This class involves very little lecture from the teacher. All students are required to facilitate one group activity each, specifically a ritual, for the entire class. They come to their own definition of the term “ritual” and include it as they bring to their cohort what had meaning to them in response to the assignment. Some examples of what students have included in this assignment are: the Japanese tea ceremony, tying tobacco bundles, filling pots and planting seeds, nature walks, chanting, and many practices of offering gratitude and forgiveness.

At the onset of the course there is a lot of concern from the students about “doing a ritual.” Performance anxiety, religious misinterpretations, negative ideas and feelings about that project have all come up at the beginning of this class. Active listening, genuine warmth and acceptance of divergent ideas and feelings lessen anxiety and the fear of judgment, activities not commonly addressed in a classroom setting. Students have been creative in their rituals. They also have learned how many and what type of rituals are involved in their daily lives. Through these practices everyone receives the benefit of self-initiation and learning from each other.

**Knowledge That Permeates Everything.**

The next element of significant experiential learning is that it is pervasive. Students often claim that their relationships in other arenas of their lives are improved by their experiences in the classroom. There are often comments like, “Class became a supportive laboratory for ideas and feelings. The more I experimented there, the more I could experiment everywhere. I felt empowered” (Tom. Personal communication. 2011). It seems that the more integrated the learning experience becomes, the more extensive it is in the learner’s life. Or, the more self-initiated the student is, the more pervasive the learning experience. “You tend to get out of this class what you put in. The more you get involved the bigger the learning and the rewards” (Katy. Personal communication. 2011).
A common experience routinely reported is that the more they feel listened to and engaged with their peers and teacher, the more the students want that deeper connection with everyone in his or her world. Some class members have reported poignant and meaningful experiences such as asking parents and other significant others to share more about themselves and listen to their own sharing. Two previous members of this class asked their partners to take it the following semester so they could share the exercises they learned.

The authenticity and transparency of the teacher/facilitator is essential for inviting meaningful self-disclosure. Honest, relevant, personal and professional story telling can be very helpful. Of particular value are those stories that exemplify challenging life lessons overcome by the skills, talents, or mindset currently being experienced by the class members. Immediacy is a compliment to this depth of learning as something defined in the moment is much more powerful and integral to the learner than something they need to retrieve from the past.

**Grades**

The forth element of a significant learning environment is that the classroom experience is evaluated by the learner. Ideally the summative and formative evaluation comes from the learner. At the onset of this class students are asked to write down what they hope to gain and what skills they plan to integrate in their learning for the semester. Then at the finish of the semester they contrast their initial hope with their experience and discuss their learning process. Students give themselves a grade and the rationale for that grade. I have used self-evaluations as the final "project" and ask students to spend some time writing about their learning in a meaningful way.

In *Depth Therapies* class the students evaluate each other as well as themselves. After each ritual and mandala presentation students evaluate their individual contributions. They are asked to share the challenging and the rewarding aspects of their projects. Others in the circle then give their written feedback to the instructor that includes points for the presenter's efforts along with rationales.
for those points. The facilitator averages the group grade and gives all the written feedback to the student who is being evaluated. The student receives the averaged self and peer evaluation grade.

Throughout the semester students receive feedback from their peers and facilitator and use their check-in at the beginning of each class to give the group insight into their own personal lives of the last week and any connections to the course content that they noticed. A communication feedback loop is instituted in the class based on mutual trust and caring. Students follow up on personal challenges people mention, family difficulties or transitions. Last spring two Japanese students with families who were being directly impacted by the incident at Fukushima were in the class. Class time was spent on the thoughts and feelings brought about by conversation regarding living with danger and uncertainty. Metaphors of disaster and ways to deal with loss, anger, grief and other post traumatic responses ensued. I would grade that experience as an A+; it was relevant, had meaning, and was generated and evaluated by a self-initiated student and the learning permeated each individual as well as the group.

Grading in the current university culture is the currency of power and success. Students have been inculcated by the educational system to believe that grades actually reflect learning or personal value. I have had students demand that I give them a specific grade! Over the last thirty years dealing with students about their classroom "performance" has been a continued challenge. After trying many different ways of giving grades I have added to what Rogers suggests for learner evaluation. The learner alone does not determine the final grade; rather it becomes a classroom community task.

I have an engaged dialogue with each student about his or her learning process and style. We then notice together less developed areas that might need additional coursework, service experience, lab time, etc. Then the student self-evaluation, the feedback and grades from his or her peers, along with feedback from the teacher all become part of the overall course grade. This combination works well and keeps the primary focus on the student’s individual strengths within the group.
The cooperation between the teacher, the class members and every student is a prominent aspect of this evaluation modality. Working together the students feel supported in all areas of the course evaluation and enthusiastic about their next learning opportunity. It is like Sarah says, "When an evaluation process focuses on my strengths and uniquenesses I want to push for my personal best!" (Personal communication, 2010).

Making Meaning Together

The fifth and last element of significant experiential learning is finding meaning at the essential core of the experience. When students are involved in how and what they learn and are inspired by their learning, something of substance manifests. "When there is freedom to choose, to learn at one’s own pace, to select the most relevant areas for oneself, there is a magnetism to the experience that holds the learner" (Rogers, 1983, p. 92). With significant experiential learning, purpose, value, and intentionality become paradigms alive in classroom events. The effort to assist the students to make meaning of their learning and translate that into ways that enhance their lives is the major "accomplishment" in a significant experiential learning event. Liz in a personal communication (2010) said,

After my experience with sandplay, I come away with a new sense of understanding how I would like to relate to others and the world, what my values are, my struggles, and who I really am. I felt I underwent a transformation from confusion to clarity.

Passion for learning and for being is ignited by authentic, meaningful classroom experiences that enhance quality of life. As an educator, holistic methods allow me to engage with my students as a co-learner and facilitator of meaning. The traditional hierarchical method of teaching down to students, or filling them up is then replaced by a model grounded in cooperation and joined inquiry. Nowhere in the Depth Therapies class is meaning and co-learning more present than in the sandplay assignment.

For the course requirement, students pair up and take turns, first being the player in the sand and then as the one who witnesses the player. Students may play with the sand wet or dry, and may
choose to use figurines and other objects, or focus on playing in the sand alone. After the students have played both roles they write a paper comparing the experience of their sandplay with the one they witnessed. These papers are not intended to judge or evaluate one player with or against the other. Rather, they are intended to compare the internal subjective experience in response to what one has experienced in playing and witnessing. The sandplay become a projective tool for all involved, the student-player, the student-witness and the facilitator.

The figurines I chose were symbolic representations of energies that I possess. I am surprised at how deeply meaningful each figure is to me. Each statuette is a manifestation of elements that comprise my Self; some figures representing traits I did not know I even possess. (Liz. Personal communication, 2010)

As the player, the student may remain non-verbal or may verbally express thoughts and feelings while engaging with the sand. The witness remains silent and out of the sight of the player, while also serving as a timekeeper for the 35 minute session. When invited I participate and say what I see, feel, or intuit with the student.

Maria made a connection that was a revelation to me. She suggested that the strength of the warrior figurine, mirrored my own personal strength. I have never considered myself to be a strong person, and I do not believe I would have arrived at this connection were it not for Maria. (Randy. Personal communication, 2010)

While working with the sandplay modality in psychotherapy I might remain more non-verbal; in this setting it is an experience of joined learning. To be invited into a student’s inner world through this process and then to converse about it is an experience that I value. I appreciate and find it meaningful to be a trusted other and co-inquisitor, supporting questions and insights that are of a deep and personal nature brought about by this significant learning experience.

**Conclusion**

How a class ends will vary with each semester. The conclusion of a class like *Depth Oriented Psychotherapies* is often
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poignant. After four months of deep sharing and serious, concentrated and intentional learning, everyone feels connected. Respect is high and fuels the planning of the final class ritual. It is a deliberate and significant task to which everyone feels involved in and committed to.

Many students have no experience with closure in their personal or academic lives. It is not unusual to hear of people avoiding, discounting, or simply ignoring the end of something. Reports of people ending relationships with significant others and family members on-line, or in a text message are becoming more and more common. Teachers often miss opportunities to have relevant conversations with their students about their work over the semester. Many colleagues do not meet with their students, electing instead to end classes early with on-line or take home and hand-in exams. Good-bye and good luck is the end of it.

People are often uncomfortable with the vulnerable feelings that can come up when interacting with this kind of depth. Allowing the feelings to be alive and to have meaning involves honest reflection and validation from the teacher and other members of the circle.

For Depth Therapies this ending is a very important aspect of the class. In psychotherapy taking the time to end a therapeutic relationship may be the client’s first experience in hearing how he or she is cared about and has made an impact on another. It is an opportunity to celebrate growth, development, tenacity, and change. The same is true in this class, and for that reason, to date, every ending has been a celebration. We have had potlucks, traveled to local parks, or to the ocean. We have walked a labyrinth together, burned our art in a bonfire, created a group sandplay, sung songs of goodbyes from other cultures and shared our appreciations and regrets of the semester.

The content of the course is replete throughout the concluding ceremony as students show how they have integrated their learning. I have found these ending rituals to be honest and heartfelt. And for most students it is in reflection of the course or in connection with other people that they see the true value of what they have learned.

Having an integrated significant learning experience assists students and teachers in transforming antiquated thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that hamper living one’s potential. This student-centered modality certainly calls us all to the challenge of learning by being and becoming more whole. Rogers (1983) said it best:

It (significant experiential learning) is a door to being fully alive in the classroom. Also it is a door to being more fully yourself. Some of you will want to close that door because what is on the other side seems too risky, too emotional, too frighteningly self-responsible, and the paths it leads to seem too uncertain and unknown. Others may wish to peer cautiously inside, and to take a few tentative steps. Others will feel “This is for me,” and realize from the example given that it can come about. (p. 40)

Whole person teaching methods can and do influence our students as well as teachers in very important ways. As more educators are willing to take the risk to be authentic, transparent and honest in their classrooms, that alone will help change many of the entrenched dynamics of the educational system.
References


