Abstract

The reflections of an assistant professor facilitating a graduate student Person-Centered Approach (PCA) independent study experience are presented. A brief introduction to the assistant professor’s approach to learning and the events leading up to the independent study are discussed. The assistant professor’s journal entries of the person-centered experience, including dates, reflections, related letters, and e-mails are provided.

Pas de Deux: An Assistant Professor's Journey in a Person-Centered Independent Study Experience

During the 2002 spring academic semester, I agreed to facilitate a Person-Centered Approach (PCA) independent study experience requested by Marsha Smith, a graduate student in the department of counselor education in which I am an assistant professor. I wrote a journal of my experience; a journal that illuminates the experience as one of shared academic, professional, and personal learning by both student and professor. A brief introduction to my learning approach is presented in this article, along with my journal, and an account of related pre-journal events.

My Approach to the Facilitation of Learning

As a clinician and an assistant professor, my approach is person-centered; very much in keeping with the attitudes expressed in readings such as Client-Centered Therapy (Rogers, 1951), Freedom to Learn (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), and Learning and Being in Person-Centred Counselling (Merry, 1999). I believe that learning can be encouraged to the extent that students are involved in a way that is real and important to them. My approach is an experiential, being-in-the-moment approach that is antithetical to directive, didactic, expert teaching styles. I strive to foster a classroom climate of trust in which curiosity and desire for learning are cultivated and enhanced. I strive to offer genuineness, acceptance, and understanding; and to provide resources when requested. I offer students their space to be, and to learn. In doing so, student-centered responsibility and meaning in learning is facilitated. By allowing them the experience of freedom to express themselves and the adventure of discovery, I facilitate their growth as lifetime learners.

While relatively new in the academic world, I am already keenly aware of how such approaches to facilitating learning are sometimes perceived as radical and unorthodox. Most of my students comment that, while they find my approach initially
disconcerting, they quickly embrace their freedom, their self-motivation, and their joy of learning. They frequently comment on how meaningful the experience has been for them, on their surprise at how much they have learned and retained, and on how they wish their learning to continue.

**Pre-Journal Events**

During the 2001 Spring semester, Marsha attended two of my graduate classes: Individual Counseling Concepts and Measurement and Evaluation Concepts. She engaged in both classes by bringing her full self actively to class. She consistently offered ideas that were well organized and thought provoking, co-facilitating the class along with her colleagues. She demonstrated herself not only as a capable graduate student, but also as an outstanding graduate student. At the end of the semester Marsha told me that something unusual had happened for her during this course and that she intended to write me a letter discussing it. She also stated that she wished to meet with me to discuss the possibility of independently studying several counseling approaches in depth.

**The Assistant Professor’s Journey**

May 8, 2001: I have met with Marsha to discuss her independent study. She has entitled it *Counseling Adolescents: Feminist, Behaviorist, and Person-Centered Approaches*. She has outlined the experience as follows: read five texts, write three ten-page papers (one on each of the three approaches in her title), and meet with me one hour per week to discuss books, other related readings, concerns, and view videotapes. The texts she has selected are: *Counseling the Adolescent: Individual, Family, and School* (Carlson & Lewis, 1998), *Theoretical Foundations and Biological Bases of Development and Adolescence* (Lerner & Lerner, 1999), *Contemporary Behavior Therapy* (Spiegler & Guerverement, 1998), *Child-Centered Counseling & Psychotherapy* (Boy & Pine, 1995), and *Children’s Rights, Therapist’s Responsibilities: A Feminist Commentary* (Anderson & Hill, 1997).

I shared with Marsha that, while my area of specialty is the PCA, I would be happy to facilitate this experience, share what I know, and learn more about other approaches. We filled out and signed all the required forms and Marsha said she would submit them to the registrar.

I feel excited to be working with Marsha again. She seems motivated, ambitious, and open to a PCA learning experience. I also feel curious about her interest in the three approaches for study when she has sought me out for a PCA independent study. And I feel happy to have the opportunity to offer a Person-centered course as an independent study in preparation for eventually offering it as a scheduled course.

September 6, 2001: The letter Marsha said she would send regarding her experience of my classes last spring arrived today. It is dated September 4, 2001 and reads:

Dear Leslie,

I confess that I am surprised to be writing this letter. You are the only professor I studied with this past spring semester, taking Individual Counseling and Measurements & Evaluation. At the beginning of those courses, I was so

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upset that I thought I would never be able to relate to you, and that I might not achieve the B grade level needed to continue in the Graduate Program. Now I write to you because I would like to share my transformation with you, as a way of expressing my gratitude to you and as a way of better understanding what happened in me. The two courses were slightly different emotionally for me... However, the process was fundamentally the same so I am going to simply express what transpired as one flow of events.

The first class was basically straightforward. I met you, received the course information, met the other students and left feeling that I could handle the work. During the second class and through the next one or two, I became unsettled-in fact, upset. I experienced you as very much "here," present, listening, attentive, teaching. Yet I also experienced a gap that I was not comfortable with. I did not pick up from you the pattern of support and encouragement that I had experienced from others. The gap became a chasm for me. I became very frightened of receiving a low grade. I truly lost sleep over this and began physically dragging. Something kept nagging at me, though. I could do the work. I felt convinced that you were as fully engaged in listening and teaching as you appeared to be. But I could not understand the basic student question, "What does Leslie want?" - Or, more precisely --- "What do I have to do to get a good grade?" I feel a bit embarrassed now, after this process has gone its course, to realize that that was really my question. I squirmed in my seat over what to do - drop out? Give up? Take the course another time? After the third or fourth week, I finally decided that I was just going to do the best I could and learn the most I could and whatever grade you gave me would be your decision! In other words, I took ownership of my Individual Counseling course and my Measurements & Evaluation course. I began to thoroughly enjoy both. And after I did that - took ownership and began to enjoy the process - I suddenly realized that that was what you had wanted for me as a student. That experience of ownership was what the chasm had left a space for. What a gift! What a feeling of freedom-a feeling that flows over me now as I write. I truly thank you, Leslie, for having the courage to teach as you do... You are a fine teacher with a gift for creating a stimulating learning environment... I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to study with you...

Very sincerely yours,

Marsha A. Smith

Wow! I feel so pleased: as a professor and as a human being. She seems to have really understood my person-centered approach to learning at a deep level; she truly "gets it." And Marsha's experience of this understanding is to a point that has motivated her to share her wonderment with me in her insightful letter. She has taken the time to share with me this precious understanding, this person-centered understanding. After receiving this beautiful letter I am all the more excited to be sharing this PCA independent study with Marsha!

September 12, 2001: Marsha met with me today to discuss postponing our person-centered experience until next semester. She plans to schedule a meeting later this
semester to discuss her new ideas for the spring course in detail. I feel disappointed. I felt excited about the intimacy and growth that I might experience in our person-centered experience. Now I feel so disappointed that I cannot recall why she said she wished to postpone. I am remembering something about her job: A new job, or a new position/promotion, or the intensity of her classes this semester coupled with her job. I also feel left out, and at the same time happy that she intends to pursue our Person-centered project next semester.

November 12, 2001: Marsha and I met to discuss her PCA independent study for Spring 2002. She has changed the title to Person-Centered Therapy and Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents. She stated that after researching additional literature she would like to focus on the PCA and has changed the texts previously outlined to: The Carl Rogers Reader (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989), Experiences in Relatedness: Groupwork and the Person-Centered Approach (Lago & MacMillan, 1999), Person-Centered Therapy: A revolutionary paradigm (Bozarth, 1998), and A Way of Being (Rogers, 1980). She has outlined the experience as follows: read four texts, write one 30-page paper, and meet with me one hour per week to discuss texts, other related readings, concerns, and view videotapes.

I am happy to note Marsha’s focused interest on the PCA. As I reflect on the process of this experience, I am also feeling joyfully humble. It seems this independent study started long before this semester. Marsha has been contemplating, refining her course since last spring! Looking back on my notes from September 12, my left out feeling now makes sense. I was limiting the person-centered experience to within the semester, to within the box of the university system, to the compartments in which I organize my experiences. Marsha was not. She moved ahead without me! Not quite a person-centered being, Dr. McCulloch! Well, at least in limiting myself to "my box" I stayed out of her way! Ha-ha! And so my person-centered experience had unknowingly begun as well! I take to future classes this reminder that experience, learning, development, actualization occurs continually as a process, at an individual pace. Thank you for the learning, Marsha!

November 26, 2001: Marsha and I met today and signed her fully outlined PCA independent study proposal for Spring 2002. She stated she would deliver it to the Registrar. We plan to meet Tuesdays from 3:15 - 4:15 p.m. during the spring semester.

January 12, 2002: I received the following e-mail from Marsha today:

Subject: Marsha Smith Course Meeting
Hi Leslie,
I want to confirm that we will begin our spring adventure together for the Independent Study on Tuesday January 29 at 3:15 PM in your office. I have had several auspicious events to mark the beginning of this! First of all, I had great difficulty locating the Bozarth book (I am forgetting the exact title at the moment). I went on the net to the person-centered therapy sites and had such great help-including from John (no last name but an e-mail address that contained schlienjo) who asked to be remembered to you. And, I heard from Dr. Bozarth who offered to send the book at no cost since I was having such difficulty.

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locating it. However, John had helped me get the publisher's address so the book was already en route from England when Dr. Bozarth's message came through. I found this very touching. And, I will be attending the Counselor Day on 1/23, taking a personal day from work. My morning session is with Howard Kirschenbaum on Carl Rogers and my afternoon session is with the Cochrans, an introduction to Child-Centered Play Therapy. I am just delighted. Looking forward to seeing you again,

Marsha Smith

Marsha's motivation and exploration continue! And they are contagious! I feel my excitement and motivation increasing. To be in such direct and regular contact with another person-centered person is uplifting! I have started reworking four articles that have been sitting in my office for over a year. And I intend to complete and submit them this summer! I wonder if Marsha realizes she is hob-nobbing with person-centered greats John Schlein, Jerold Bozarth, Howie Kirschenbaum, and Jeff and Nancy Cochran! All are so accessible and kind, I feel warm inside and proud to be part of the person-centered community.

January 29, 2002: Marsha and I met today for the first "official" meeting in her PCA independent study. Marsha discussed her "mission statement" which was the application of this experience to her workplace and future social activism. She would like to read A Way of Being (Rogers, 1980) for discussion next week. Reflecting on this meeting, I find myself noting that Marsha seems to have organized her thinking and this course in a way that I suspect may change through the experience of the course itself!

February 5, 2002: Marsha stated she viewed Rogers on videotape recently, so as she read A Way of Being she heard Rogers' voice with his words. Marsha said that reading Rogers' ideas in his own words was helpful to her in clarifying his theories and in understanding her own self. We discussed at length 8 or 9 points Marsha had marked from the book. She said this process of reading and discussing is helping to integrate her self with her career, with society, and with her history. She noted specifically that this PCA process is facilitating her ability to verbalize Rogers' theory when a rationale for her interventions is required at her work. She said it is also helping her to put into words some of her painful historical experiences.

Marsha's desire to be able to provide other mental health professionals at her job (professionals with different theoretical orientations and/or a lack of understanding of the value of the PCA) a rationale for her approach hits home. I have experienced professionals (clinically and academically) who valued concrete interventions over attitude; who valued strategies over empathy, genuineness, and respect. I would like to note something else. Sometimes I worry about the fact that I am often so engaged in processing the ideas Marsha is expressing, that I do not let her know I have heard her and that I understand her. I feel a desire to slow down a bit and summarize occasionally. I, too, struggle...with my rationale... for person-centered teaching... being.

February 12, 2002: Marsha welcomed a faculty member who happened to knock at the door into our person-centered experience today. He agreed to visit for a short time

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Marsha shared her thoughts on several ideas from *A Way of Being*, and on our person-centered experience. Marsha stated that she found the clarification and continuation of the readings most helpful. She said "Our discussions...are the threads weaving together all the readings, learnings, videos, and courses..." Marsha is planning to attend a retreat so we will not meet next week (February 19). For next time she would like to read *The Carl Rogers Reader* (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989) and *Person-Centered Therapy: A revolutionary paradigm* (Bozarth, 1998). I felt so proud to listen to Marsha speak of this person-centered experience. And I feel so happy to be sharing this learning with her: happy in our person-centered communion.

February 26, 2002: Marsha stated her focus at this point was the question "Is it possible to be person-centered in my middle school?" We discussed Kirschenbaum and Henderson (1989), more points Marsha noted from Bozarth (1998), finished our reading of Rogers (1980). We will not be meeting next week as Marsha is planning to attend another seminar next week (March 5).

I am keenly aware of my sharing of this experience with Marsha. I shared with her that I feel myself extending my arms to her while cupping in my hands a delicate little bird: our person-centered experience! And Marsha is there, extending her hands cupping that same little bird. We are sharing this experience, sharing and living what we value: empathy, genuineness, and respect. It feels so rich and wonderful.

March 12, 2002: Marsha and I continued our discussions on Jerold Bozarth's (1998) book. Marsha raised the topics of evil, natural evil, and feral children. We also discussed recent articles in the BAPCA journal *Person-Centred Practice* focusing on evil (Crawford, 2001; Worsley, 2001). Marsha stated "I am really someplace else now."

Next week (March 19) is spring break so Marsha and I will not be meeting.

I feel fully engaged in this person-centered experience. Our discussion is touching my thoughts about professional literature and my academic functioning. The complex intermingling of things personal and professional seems far more clear. I hear words from Ned Gaylin at the LaJolla conference and colleagues from the British person-centered community in Manchester. I am also more aware of things I do that I would like to change. I would prefer to listen more. Everywhere. I am aware of the moments when I do not listen to Marsha, when I swirl in my own thoughts and speculations about what she has said.

March 26, 2002: Marsha completed a paper entitled *Wasn't I Good?* and read it to me today. In it, she shared an encounter with one of her students, her approach within this encounter, and her reflections through her new person-centered perspective. Her being in the encounter was magnificently person-centered. [for a description of Marsha's encounter see the article entitled “Pas de Deux: A Student's Journey in a Person-Centered Independent Study Experience” in this issue of *The Person-Centered Journal*]. She seemed pleased to read the paper, and as she did I felt greatly moved. Moved to tears. I am so impressed, and proud, and happy to be part of this experience! As her paper has indicated, Marsha has begun to integrate the discussions, readings, and theory of this experience to her work. And she has brought her self to this place! Marsha stated that she would like to
focus the second half of this course on exploration of her self. For next meeting we will read *Freedom to Learn* (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

April 2, 2002: I said to Marsha that I was hoping she would re-read her paper *Wasn't I Good?* She did and I shared that I thought her article would be a lovely reflective piece to submit to the *Person-Centered Journal*. I offered to read it editorially. She agreed and we decided that if I had it back to her next week, she would bring it in, with changes, to mail on April 16. We also discussed *Freedom to Learn* (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). I mentioned I was contemplating an article from our experience together, and talked about my learning and sharing in this process. For next meeting we will read *Experiences in Relatedness: Groupwork and the Person-Centered Approach* (Lago & MacMillan, 1999). This learning experience excites me; and preoccupies me. As I enter the class I teach following our PCA independent study, I notice it takes me a while to orient myself to the changed setting and people.

April 9, 2002: We discussed my editorial comments and thoughts about her paper *Wasn't I Good?* and Marsha took it saying she would make changes and send it in to the PC Journal this week. We viewed part of Rogers’ tape on facilitating a group (Rogers, 1978). We also discussed *Experiences in Relatedness: Groupwork and the Person-Centered Approach* (Lago & MacMillan, 1999). I am aware that this experience is affecting my being. The review of the person-centered literature with Marsha has renewed my spirit. Surrounded by so many mental health academics and clinicians who are unaccepting of the PCA, often I feel alone and/or attacked. I bring this renewal, this strength to my classes, my students, my colleagues, my family, my world.

April 16, 2002: Marsha discussed an historical issue she explored in her paper *Wasn't I Good?* She talked about the words intrusion and worthiness relevant to this experience. I shared my concern about being so engaged in processing her ideas, that I do not let her know I have heard her and that I understand her. Marsha shared that the expressiveness of my face fully conveyed my presence, caring and regard of her. For next week we will read *Carl Rogers on Personal Power: Inner Strength and its revolutionary impact* (Rogers, 1977). I caught myself insidiously interpreting in one of my comments to Marsha. I wish I had listened instead. I feel embarrassed to think of it, and guilty of accusing her of refusing to share. Ugh! Marsha continues her self-exploration. So do I...

April 23, 2002: Marsha stated she is writing another article. She said, "I am so hungry!" She talked about the words intrusion and worthiness; how they were not accurate in describing what she now recognized as feeling afraid. It was not about unworthiness or insufficiency (*Wasn't I Good?* comes to mind). It was about feeling afraid. Afraid of being injured, hurt emotionally and physically; of feeling unwelcome through no fault of her own. My own faux pas (the interpretive refusal comment) apparently stayed with her, and we talked at length about it. Marsha's exploration of her self continues. These academic, theoretical, professional, and personal pursuits are so inextricably linked! And I am linked in this process! I find myself strangely exploring seeming unrelated pieces of my self. As I reflect, these pieces are linked to the process and affect I am experiencing. I am reflecting, exploring, processing: not only this experience, but also my life, my
relationships, my personal and professional self. And I find myself feeling things that are
difficult to put to words.

April 30, 2002: Marsha shared her second paper titled An Independent Study. It is a
beautiful essay on her experience of this PCA independent study. As she read it I
remember thinking "Wow! She has connected her personhood with her professional self!"
At the beginning of this process Marsha had hoped to understand and implement her
chosen approach in her work. Her paper reveals she has integrated her approach into her
self. I discussed my (this) journal and my thoughts on submitting it as a reflective article to
the PC Journal. I also shared that I thought her second article would make another
wonderful reflective piece on the person-centered experience. Marsha suggested that we
might submit them as "companion articles." We both enthusiastically agreed to do so!

I again find myself reflecting on what words might express what I am feeling. I
am filled with feelings that are huge and important to me; existentially-related feelings. I
am experiencing an openness, a "dismantling of walls."

May 7, 2002: Our last scheduled "class" meeting for the semester. Marsha and I
shared our learnings and our feelings regarding the termination of this experience. We also
scheduled our meetings for sharing our finalized articles (the "companion" pieces). We
will meet May 14 to share our articles, and again on May 22 for any final feedback before
(hopefully) mailing them to the PC Journal. My desire to understand this feeling of
openness continues. It is as though I am standing in an open field.

May 13, 2002: I contacted Marsha to reschedule our appointment for May 14,
letting her know I was not yet finished with my article. She agreed to change our meetings
to May 22 and May 29. I feel a bit ashamed for not having met our "deadline." I also feel
excited about our project, and sad knowing our scheduled meetings will soon end! I
mentioned to Marsha my struggle to find the words to express my feelings about this
experience. I clearly am taking from the experience so much that is special and important
to me.

After we talked today, I received the following e-mail from Marsha:

Subject: FWD: Wasn't I good
Hi Leslie! I couldn't wait until tomorrow to share this with you! Marsha
To: [Marsha Smith] Sent: Monday, May 13, 2002 2:38 PM
Subject: Wasn't I good
Dear Marsha,
Thank-you for your submission of "Wasn't I Good?" to The Person-
Centered Journal. The article is well written, and I believe it will make a valuable
contribution to the literature. I am unfortunately without an appropriate reviewer
as yet, but hope to find one soon! Meanwhile, it would help if you are able to
send me an electronic copy of the manuscript, perhaps as a PC formatted
attachment in reply to this e-mail. Our editorial policy calls for open review.
Accordingly, when I have found the appropriate two reviewers, I will have them
send their comments directly to you, with copies to me. You can then dialogue

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with the reviewers until the article meets everyone’s satisfaction. Thank you for your patience.

Jon
Jon Rose, Ph.D. Editor-In-Chief

Our experience has produced a concrete result. While this is a marvelous happening, it seems dwarfed, secondary to the other pieces I struggle to identify. The satisfaction and whatever it is I am feeling are continuing to affect my sense of self and my interactions with others. I continue to ponder my feelings, the words to express them, and the “bigger” meaning of my experience with Marsha this semester.

May 20, 2002: Today I received Marsha’s evaluation of our PCA independent study experience as the course EDC 699. She has graced me with a beautiful, caring, in-depth evaluation of our time together. She said:

I wanted to understand the PCA. Leslie and I worked together on every detail of the course: the texts, the pacings, the readings discussions, the papers.... Each week emerged as unique - I came prepared to discuss and we went far beyond what I could have imagined. I leave energized to pick up the texts and go farther; to reflect on my personhood and my way of being in my world; to look at my professional life and how I am being genuine and true to myself in my encounters. I love this course - I grew, I learned, I achieved my goal. I wanted to understand one theory/practice very well before I begin professional work, to have a base to work from, a foundation, a rationale for my way of being. I have that. I am very grateful to Leslie for being; for being with me as I am as a student so I could achieve my goal.

May 22, 2002: Marsha and I met this afternoon to share and exchange our “journals” for edits. I felt so excited about hearing her reactions to my piece that I asked if we might meet in two days rather than waiting a week. She agreed. I feel troubled as I have yet to understand truly and put into words these feelings, these experiences and learnings. As I reflect on this experience, I see it has been rich! A chocolate mousse cake... with chocolate cream cheese icing... and a chocolate truffle on top! I was present as Marsha chose her professional theoretical approach: As she explored the literature of that approach, moved toward an internalized understanding of that approach, and reviewed her self in relation to the approach (from both an historic and a current perspective) I was present as she effectively applied the approach to her work, as she wrote about these experiences, and as she submitted them for journal publication! I was present as she exceeded the already ambitious academic experience she had outlined! She proposed four texts and finished having read and discussed six. She discussed numerous other articles, theories, and authors. She proposed one 30-page paper and finished with two reflective articles she intended to submit to journals. She explored both her professional and personal selves. All within a single graduate level course. This journal explores only the tip of my takings from this massive person-centered iceberg. I have experienced my first offering of a fully person-centered learning experience. With that, I am more aware of the sharing that occurs, and the relationship that develops. Marsha and

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I both experienced the excitement, motivation, and anticipation for learning. I am far more aware of the growth that occurred for me because I experienced it to a greater degree within the greater degree of freedom of this experience.

May 24, 2002: I meet with Marsha this afternoon and I feel confident we will work today to read and offer suggestions on both companion pieces then mail them to the PC Journal. Since I will share this journal with her at that time this will be my last entry. It is just today that I have a sense, a beginning understanding of what has been happening in me. I valued, accepted, and listened to Marsha when I was with her. And as I was with her, totally engaged in the experience of her being, so she was with me. I felt accepted, valued, and listened to. I felt no pretense, no walls, no inhibition, no hesitation. Our shared understanding and desire for this "way of being" freed me from the oppression of the student-instructor yoke. She accepted me as a person, and I was free within the experience. This was more than my just my understanding and commitment to the PCA. It was our fully shared experience, and at a deep level. That was the openness, the field that I experienced. That is what I was feeling that I can now express as an expansive beauty. An expansive, open state of beautiful being that we mutually unfolded. Marsha and I were being, truly being our open, genuine, and respectful selves. And in this place, this way of being, I felt the "goodness" of being. The innocence, the safety, the assuredness, the growth, the love that can be. I feel tears of joy in my heart.

References


