

# Humanistic Approach to Education

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## Abstract

*The chief proponent of humanistic viewpoint in education was Carl Rogers, an American psychologist, personality theorist and a renowned counsellor. His views on learning and teaching may be seen as an extension of his theory of psychotherapy. If his theory is client-centred, his theory of learning is student-centred. According to Rogers, today educational practices at all levels are basically authoritarian and coercive; teachers are perceived as possessors of knowledge, and students as its passive recipients; educational settings are typically impersonal, with greater emphasis on acquiring cognitive skills than on developing affective skills. Contemporary education does not teach us how to live with others in cordial relationships. Learning espoused by Rogers is significant or experiential learning; it gives equal emphasis to cognition as well as feeling. If experiential learning is to transpire, then a personal relationship between the teacher and the learner must exist. Certain attitudinal qualities such as (a) realness or genuineness in the teacher, (b) prizing, acceptance, trust, and (c) empathetic understanding, are crucial to such relationship. The teacher is seen as facilitator of learning and the goal of education is to make the students healthy and fully functioning persons.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The chief proponent of humanistic viewpoint in education was Carl

Rogers, an American psychologist, personality theorist and a renowned counsellor. He was one of the founders

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of the humanistic psychology, which is often referred to as the 'third force' in psychology, the other two being psychoanalysis and behaviourism. According to psychoanalysis, man is basically biological being, an animal; he has evolved from the animal ancestry and shares with it several basic proclivities; at the most, he is a domesticated animal; the goal of education is to socialise him, domesticate him and make him fit to live as a member of society. According to behaviourism, man is a sophisticated machine, at the best, he is a super computer; education must provide required software to regulate his behaviour. But, according to humanistic psychologists, man is more than an animal; he has special characteristics that are not found in animals; he is not a machine, he is the creator of the machines; it is unfair to equate the creator of the machine with his creation, the machine. He is a human being endowed with special qualities that are not shared by animals or machines. Education should try to help him to become what he can become, to realise his potentialities, and to reach the maximum development.

The term 'humanistic psychology' was coined by Abraham Maslow to describe a position that focuses on the creative potentialities inherent in human beings, and that seeks ways to help them realise their highest and most important goals. Nearly all of the humanistic theories postulate the existence of an innate growth

mechanism within individuals that will move them towards realisation of their potentialities if right kind of environmental conditions exist.

This growth process has been variously named by its proponents as the drive towards self-actualisation, self-realisation, or self-hood. Humanistic psychologists advocate that this growth process must be allowed to express and the right environment is to be created for this purpose. They believe that proper education can do this to some extent.

Rogers was basically a psychotherapist and the founder of a form of counselling called client-centred therapy, the most widely known and practised technique of counselling all over the world. His interest in learning and teaching developed during his later years, especially with the publication of his book, *Freedom to Learn* (Rogers, 1969). His views on learning and teaching may be seen as an extension of his theory of psychotherapy. If his theory is client-centred, his theory of learning is student-centred or person-centred. His theory of learning is predicated on the hypothesis: "If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth and change, and personal development will occur."

According to Rogers, today educational practices at all levels are basically authoritarian and coercive; teachers are perceived as possessors of knowledge and students as its

passive recipients; education is merely the process of transmitting information from teachers to students; educational settings are typically impersonal, with too much emphasis on performance and its evaluation through examination; too little attention is devoted to issues of importance. There is greater emphasis on acquiring of cognitive skills than on developing affective skills. Learning espoused by Rogers is significant or experiential learning; it gives equal weight to cognition (knowledge) as well as feeling.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF SIGNIFICANT OR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

For Rogers, learning must be meaningful, significant and experiential. It must be relevant to the individual's needs and bring about substantial change in her/his behaviour and experience. The defining characteristics of such learning are:

1. It has a quality of personal involvement: the whole person — both feeling and cognitive aspects — is involved in the learning process.
2. It is self-initiated: although the stimulus comes from outside, the comprehension, the grasping comes from within.
3. It is pervasive: it makes a difference in the learner's behaviour and experience — his attitudes, opinions and even the personality of the learner.

4. It is self-evaluated: the locus of evaluation resides in the learner, not in an external criterion.
5. Its essence is meaning: when learning occurs, the elements of meaning is built into the whole experience.

#### **POSTULATES OF ROGERS' LEARNING THEORY**

Rogers' theory is predicated on permitting the learner to be free to engage in self-initiated, self-reliant learning that is motivated by a self-actualisation tendency. The instructor's role is that of a facilitator who helps the learner to actualise all potentialities. Rogers' views can be summarised in terms of the following postulates:

1. There is an innate potentiality for learning. This potentiality and desire for learning can be realised under suitable conditions. The teacher, as a facilitator of learning, must work around the individual's natural desire to learn.
2. Significant learning occurs under conditions in which the material to be learned is perceived by learners as significant and relevant to their own purposes. Under such circumstances, learning occurs speedily.
3. Learning that is threatening to self-organisation is resisted. When the external threat is minimal, assimilation of learning is facilitated. Learning proceeds

smoothly under conditions of low threat to self.

4. Learning is more effective when one is placed in experiential confrontation with everyday problems. Learning by doing is among the most effective techniques of promoting learning.
5. Self-initiated learning is the most lasting and pervasive. It involves the whole person — feelings as well as intellect.
6. Learning is easily facilitated when the learner actively and responsibly participates in the learning process. Passive learning is less effective than active, participative learning.
7. The facilitation of independence, creativity and self-reliance is possible through self-criticism and self-evaluation rather than by external evaluation. Freedom is the atmosphere for viable learning. In creative effort, criticism from outside is fruitless. A self-reliant and independent atmosphere is most suited for significant learning.
8. Learning the process of learning is the most useful learning in the contemporary world. It involves a continuing openness to experience, and incorporation into oneself the process of change.

Teaching today is concerned with covering the syllabus. The goal of education must be the facilitation of change and learning. According to

Rogers, the only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. The important thing in learning is learning how to learn in order to cope effectively in a scientific world that is changing fast.

### **TEACHER AS FACILITATOR OF LEARNING**

Teaching and learning are not one and the same. If teaching is learning, we would have learned several good things in life from teachers. However bad a teacher may be, she/he must have taught only good things inside the class. But, the question is how many good things have we learned? Does teaching have any consequential effects on our behaviour? If it is not so, then what is the role of a teacher? According to Rogers, the function of a teacher is to facilitate learning. From facilitative learning emerges significant, experiential learning by the whole person. Contemporary education does not teach us how to live, especially how to live with others in cordial relationship. It has not helped us to aim something big and achieve it. Nobody can teach anybody anything. One can only help somebody learn when she/he is interested to learn. Socrates, the greatest philosopher and teacher, said that he is only a midwife to knowledge.

If significant learning is to transpire, then a personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner must exist. Certain attitudinal qualities are crucial to such a relationship, among the most important being: (a) realness or genuineness in the facilitator of learning, (b) prizing, acceptance, and trust and (c) empathetic understanding.

- a. *Realness in the facilitator:* learning is facilitated when the teacher is genuine, authentic, and honest. It means he is being himself, not denying himself. The teacher should establish a personal contact with the learner.
- b. *Prizing, acceptance, trust:* the second major attitudinal characteristic is prizing the learner, prizing his feelings, his opinions. The learner is accepted as a person of worth, a unique individual and is respected. Her or his feelings and opinions are prized. The learner is seen as trust-worthy. All this is unconditional; there is no demand that the learner be different or conform in some way to be accepted and respected.
- c. *Empathetic understanding:* the third attitude of the facilitator contributing self-initiated experiential and meaningful learning is empathetic understanding. It is understanding which comes from putting oneself in the place of the student to understand

her or his reactions, to experience the student's perception and feelings about what is happening. Viewing the world through the student's eyes, is almost unheard of in the classroom. Rogers suggests that if a teacher were able to make even one non-judgemental empathetic response to a student's expressed feeling, she or he would discover the power of such understanding.

### **SELF-ACTUALISATION IS THE MOTIVE**

According to Rogers, the basic motive for growth and development in all humans is self-actualising tendency. It is the principal factor that effects change in learning. The teachers do not have to motivate the students; they are self-motivated. Learners, who are in real contact with life problems, wish to learn, want to grow, seek to find out, hope to master and desire to create. The teachers' function is to create a suitable atmosphere for learning experience, to permit the self-actualising tendency to operate freely. The teacher is a facilitator, facilitating the freedom to learn by developing a relationship and creating an atmosphere that is conducive to self-motivating, self-actualising, significant learning. Any learning that significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appointed learning; that is, the mainspring of change, the principle characteristic of learning, is effected through motivation generated from the self-actualising tendency.

### **EVALUATION IN EDUCATION**

Rogers' theory of significant learning has no place for the examination system as it is practised in our schools and colleges. He repudiated the system of evaluating the learner by external criteria. Current examinations are sterile; they run counter to meaningful learning. He argued forcefully that examinations have become the beginning and end of education. Students face endless tests and examinations in their courses. Such obstacles prevent students from engaging in the independent learning necessary to a creative life. He asserted that examinations are set by life and the learner must confront the examinations of life. Sometimes, he passes them and, at other times, he does not. The learning experience must be so structured that learners organise to contend with life tests more effectively.

In a properly structured learning experience, the teacher-facilitator provides resources requisite for dealing with numerous life situations. Rather than an external evaluation system in which the learner is exposed to failure imposed by the institutional grading system, Rogers proposed programmes of self-evaluations. According to him, the learner is the final judge; he selects a course of study commensurate with the motivation of self-actualisation; he does not have to confront the pseudo-examinations of the classroom. He reads books for their intrinsic value to learning rather

than for their importance to sterile classroom examination.

### **THE GOAL OF EDUCATION**

The purpose of education is to make the students healthy and fully functioning persons. Rogers has sketched the portrait of fully functioning persons as part of his theory. According to him, fully functioning persons exhibit the following characteristics:

1. They are open to experience. They are not defensive; they are fully aware of their experiences, their feelings, their fears and pains, and accept them rather than shutting them out.
2. They trust their fellow human beings. They do what they feel is right. It does not mean they are always right. They make their own choices, experience the consequences and correct them if they are less than satisfying.
3. They are characterised by existential living. They live their experiences as they occur in the present, without trying to superimpose preconceived meaning on them. They are open and flexible, deal with the experience as it is, and discover its meaning for themselves.
4. They are creative. Creativity emerges when one is open to new experiences, trusts one's own judgements, and takes risks if she/he feels good about a new venture.

5. They live richer lives than other people do. They live the good life, not in the sense of happiness, contentment, security and bliss (although they experience these feelings at appropriate times), but a life that is exciting, challenging, meaningful and rewarding. They take risks, experience pain occasionally and face challenges courageously.
6. They are honest and open. They reject the hypocrisy prevalent in contemporary society — in governance, religion, family and education. They are open in dealing with others. They believe that institutions exist for human beings and not *vice versa*.
7. They are indifferent to material comforts and rewards. They are not concerned with status but prefer to relate to people in informal, egalitarian ways.
8. They are caring persons. They have a deep desire to help others, to contribute to society. They voluntarily help others in crisis.
9. They have deep distrust of cognitively based science and technology that is being used to exploit and harm nature and people. They believe that significant discoveries involve feelings. They do not want technology to destroy environment. They support technology only when it is wisely used to promote human welfare.
10. They will live with others in the maximum possible harmony. They have unconditional self-regard and regard for others.

Rogers knew that such people are a small minority of the total population. However, he firmly believed that they are having an impact on society out of proportion to their numbers and will continue to exert significant influence in the future.

### **CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF ROGERS' VIEWS**

According to Rogers, the present-day educational system bases its programme on a set of faulty assumptions. First of all, it assumes that students cannot be trusted to pursue their own educational goals. Teachers exhibit their mistrust of students by constantly supervising and checking on them and their work. If students were allowed to make their own choices concerning their educational goals, he believed, there would be no need to monitor their behaviour so closely because they would be positively motivated to study and learn. Surveillance is necessary to ensure compliance only when teachers set goals that are irrelevant or radically at variance with student concerns and interests.

Rogers' assumption that students should be allowed to make their own educational choices and set their own goals, because they know best what is right for them, is not taken well by some critics. They assert that

this assumption seems dubious, in view of the continual shifting of goals experienced by many students in the course of their educational careers. Further, even if they could choose the goals that are right for them, students exist in a society that may not recognise the worth and usefulness of their aims. People have the right to pursue whatever goals they wish, but society also has the right to express its priorities and reward those it considers worthy.

Rogers strongly objected to what he considered the primary emphasis in education — students as passive learners. College students, for example, typically receive information from their teachers and are expected to reproduce it in examinations. This approach stifles original and creative ideas. Rogers argued that, in an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect, and freedom from constraints, students freely test their own ideas and become creative individuals.

Several people do not agree with Rogers on this point. They argue that many people throughout history lived with constraints of institutions but still became creative. It is clear from history that the mere absence of constraint or evaluation is not a necessary condition for developing creativity. Great ideas are not gathered while sitting under the banyan tree. Thomas Edison once said that creativity is 99 per cent perspiration and 1 per cent inspiration. That is, the individual must synthesise a great deal of information before attempting to solve a problem. It does not mean that all of Rogers' views have been rejected. There is almost universal acceptance of his ideas that (1) students need to be treated with consideration and respect by their teachers, (2) teachers and students need to communicate and cooperate, and (3) teachers need to encourage students to maximise their creativity following mastery of the fundamentals.

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