Rebecca Alexander HND Early Childhood Studies session 4

Carl Rogers and Person Centred Counselling

Carl Ransom Rogers (1902 - 1987) was born in Oak Park, Illinois, and is best known as the founder of 'client-centred' or 'non-directive' therapy. Rogers initially studied theology - and as part of his studies acted as the pastor in a small church in Vermont. However, he turned to clinical and educational psychology, studying at Teachers' College of Columbia University. There he grew into clinical practice drawing on such diverse sources as Otto Rank and John Dewey (the latter through the influence of W. H. Kilpatrick - a former student of Dewey's). This mix of influences - and Carl Rogers' ability to link elements together - helps to put into context his later achievements. The concern with opening up to, and theorizing from experience, the concept of the human organism as a whole and the belief in the possibilities of human action have their parallels in the work of John Dewey. Carl Rogers was able to join these with therapeutic insights and the belief, borne out of his practice experience, that the client usually knows better to how to proceed than the therapist.

Core conditions

Thorne argues that it is not too simplistic to, 'affirm that the whole conceptual framework of Carl Rogers rests on his profound experience that human beings become increasingly trustworthy once they feel at a deep level that their subjective experience is both respected and progressively understood' (1992: 26). We can see this belief at work in his best known contribution - the 'core conditions' for facilitative (counselling and educational) practice - congruence (realness), acceptance and empathy).

Carl Rogers on the interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning: "What are these qualities, these attitudes, that facilitate learning?"

"Realness in the facilitator of learning. Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes is realness or genuineness. When the facilitator is a real person, being what she is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or a façade, she is much more likely to be effective. This means that the feelings that she is experiencing are available to her, available to her awareness, that she is able to live these feelings, be them, and able to communicate if appropriate. It means coming into a direct personal encounter with the learner, meeting her on a person-to-person basis. It means that she is being herself, not denying herself.

"Prizing, acceptance, trust. There is another attitude that stands out in those who are successful in facilitating learning… I think of it as prizing the learner, prizing her feelings, her opinions, her person. It is a caring for the learner, but a non-possessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in her own right. It is a basic trust - a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy… What we are describing is a prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities. The facilitator's prizing or acceptance of the learner is an operational expression of her essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism.

"Empathetic understanding. A further element that establishes a climate for self-initiated experiential learning is emphatic understanding. When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased…. [Students feel deeply appreciative] when they are

simply understood – not evaluated, not judged, simply understood from their own point of view, not the teacher's."

> Rogers (1967) 'The interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning' reprinted in H. Kirschenbaum and V. L. Henderson (eds.) (1990) *The Carl Rogers Reader*, London: Constable, pages 304-311. (The piece also appears in various editions of Rogers *Freedom to Learn*).

This orientation has a number of attractions for those seeking to work with the 'whole person' and to promote human flourishing. Notions of wholeness overlap with what Carl Rogers describes as congruence or 'realness'; and the attitude embodied and conveyed by educators may be accepting and valuing of the other (Rogers 1951). However, his third condition 'empathetic understanding' does raise a number of problems. Rogers emphasizes achieving a full an understanding of the other person as is possible. This involves a willingness and ability to enter 'the private perceptual world of the client without fear and to become thoroughly conversant with it' (Thorne 1992: 31). Here we might argue that in conversation, the task is not so much to enter and understand the other person, as to work for understanding and commitment. This is not achieved simply by getting into the shoes of another. Conversation involves working to bring together the insights and questions of the different parties; it entails the fusion of a number of perspectives, not the entering into of one (Gadamer 1979: 271-3). As Freire (1972: 63) put it, at the point of encounter, 'there are neither ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only men who are attempting, together to learn more than they now know'. In this respect, we might be arguing for dialogical - rather than person-centred, practice. There are problems when the practitioner , 'concentrates on the other person as such rather than on the subject matter - when he looks at the other person, as it were, rather than with him at what the other attempts to communicate' (Linge 1976: xx).

On education

The strength of Rogers' approach lies in part in his focus on relationship. As he once wrote, 'The facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist in the personal *relationship* between facilitator and learner'(1990: 305). *Freedom to Learn* (1969; 1983; 1993) is a classic statement of educational possibility in this respect. However, he had already begun to explore the notion of 'student-centred teaching' in *Client-Centered Therapy* (1951: 384-429). There, as Barrett-Lennard (1998: 184) notes, he offered several hypothesized general principles. These included:

We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning.

The structure and organization of the self appears to become more rigid under threat; to relax its boundaries when completely free from threat...

The educational situation which most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which 1) threat to the self of the learner is reduced a minimum, and 2) differentiated perception of the field of experience is facilitated.

In this we can see something of Rogers' debt to Dewey - but something else had been added in his particular concern with experience and selfhood. First, there is an interest in looking at the particular issues, questions and problems that participants bring (this is not a strongly curriculum-based orientation and has some parallels with the subsequent interest in self-direction in learning). Second, he draws in insights from more

psychodynamic traditions of thinking (as did educators such as A. S. Neill and Homer Lane).

Freedom to Learn brought together a number of existing papers along with new material - including a fascinating account of 'My way of facilitating a class'. Significantly, this exploration brings out the significant degree of preparation that Rogers involved himself in (including setting out aims, reading, workshop structure etc.) (Barrett-Lennard 1998: 186). Carl Rogers was a gifted teacher. His approach grew from his orientation in one-to-one professional encounters. He saw himself as a facilitator - one who created the environment for engagement. This he might do through making a short (often provocative, input). However, what he was also to emphasize was the attitude of the facilitator. There were 'ways of being' with others that foster exploration and encounter - and these are more significant than the methods employed. His paper 'The interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning' is an important statement of this orientation (included in Hirschenbaum and Henderson's [1990] collection and in *Freedom to Learn*). The danger in this is, of course, of underestimating the contribution of 'teaching'. There is a role for information transmission. Here Carl Rogers could be charged with misrepresenting, or overlooking, his own considerable abilities as a teacher. His apparent emphasis on facilitation and non-directiveness has to put alongside the guru-like status that he was accorded in teaching encounters. What appears on the page as a question or an invitation to explore something can be experienced as the giving of insight by participants in his classes

Roger's influence

These elements do not, on their own, explain the phenomenal growth of the 'person-centred' school of psychotherapy. To explain this we have to look at the man and the moment. Carl Rogers was an accomplished communicator - both in person and through his writings and films. He was also a committed practitioner who looked to his own experiences (and was, thus, difficult to dismiss as 'academic). He was able to demystify therapy; to focus on the person of the counsellor and the client (as against a concentration on technique and method); and crucially to emphasize honesty and the destructiveness of manipulation. In the service of the latter Carl Rogers was extremely wary of attempting to dig into, and make sense of the unconscious (and this could also be seen as a significant weakness in his work in some quarters). In short, he offered a new way, a break with earlier traditions. Crucially these concerns chimed with the interests of significant groups of people. Psychologists wanting to enter the field of psychotherapy; case, pastoral and youth workers wanting to develop their practice; lay people wanting to help or understand those with 'problems' - all could get something from Rogers.

The history and focus of Carl Rogers' work was one of the reasons why he has been so attractive to successive generations of informal educators. This was a language to which they could relate. The themes and concerns he developed seemingly had a direct relevance to their work with troubled individuals. Informal educators also had access to these ideas. Rogers' popularity with those providing counselling training (at various levels) opened up his work to large numbers of workers. Crucially the themes he developed were general enough to be applied to therapeutic work with groups (for example, see his work on *Encounter Groups* (1970, New York: Harper and Row) (see encounter) and in education. Significantly, Carl Rogers took up the challenge to explore what a person-centred form of education might look like.

Carl Rogers has provided educators with some fascinating and important questions with regard to their way of being with participants, and the processes they might employ. The danger in his work for informal educators lays in what has been a point of great attraction - his person-centredness. Informal education is not so much person-centred as dialogical. A focus on the other rather than on what lies between us could lead away from the relational into a rather selfish individualism. Indeed, this criticism could also be made of the general direction of his therapeutic endeavours.

Further reading and references

Rogers, C. R. (1961) *On Becoming a Person. A therapist's view of psychotherapy*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1967 - London: Constable). His classic work - exploring the process of becoming a person and how personal growth can be facilitated. Also examines the place of research in psychotherapy; a philosophy of persons; and the implications for living.

Rogers, C. R. (1980) *A Way of Being*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin. A collection of articles and pieces said to be a coda to *On Becoming a Person*. The first part examines Rogers' personal experiences; the second his professional thoughts and activities. The third section deals with education (including his paper on learning in large groups). The final piece speculates on the transformations needed in society.

Rogers, C. and Freiberg, H. J. (1993) *Freedom to Learn* (3rd edn.), New York: Merrill. *Freedom to Learn* takes the principles that Carl Rogers developed in relation to counselling and reworks them in the context of education. In other words, it is an exploration of how person-centred learning can be used in schooling and other situations and the nature of facilitation. The third edition is a reworking of the text by Freiberg. I personally prefer the earlier editions (1969; 1983).

Biographical material and commentaries

Rogers included autobiographical material in his writing. Indeed, one of his most important essays, 'This is me' in which he describes his family background and three key experiences with clients first appeared in (1961) *On Becoming a Person*. See also:

Barrett-Lennard, G. T. (1998) *Carl Roger's Helping System. Journey and substance*, London: Sage. 425 + x pages. Very useful discussion of key concepts and key figures plus a discussion of research relating to Roger's approach.

Cohen, D. (1997) *Carl Rogers. A critical biography*, London: Constable. 252 pages. New biography - only in hardback.

Kirschenbaum, H. (1979) *On Becoming Carl Rogers*, New York: Delacorte Press. Biography written while Rogers was still alive - but with some interesting insights into the development of his thought.

Thorne, B. (1992) *Carl Rogers*, London: Sage. Brian Thorne has provided us with a good introduction to Roger's work and life. He also adds a twist of his own - suggesting that Rogers represented, and drew upon, a long-standing spiritual tradition.