

A Critical Evaluation of Rogerian Theoretical Perspectives on Student-centred Learning as Applied in Professional Practice

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Abstract.

Since its origins in the 19th century, the tradition of integrative humanist therapy has contributed in no small way to an enriched understanding of learning, with a focus on learner-centredness. Theoretical insights and practical skill applications, from a variety of therapeutic modalities, have been applied within the field of education, not least the contribution of Carl Rogers (1902-1987). Rogerian educational practices are highly student-centred. The primary aim of this paper is to critically assess the potentiality of Rogerian theory and practice to enhance the author's own professional practice. Objectives include to conduct a literature analysis study of the Rogerian humanist approach, with an emphasis on student-centred learning, and to critically reflect on my own student-centred learning practices, by means of evidence-based primary research. An action research self-reflexive methodological framework is adopted, and data gathering methods include documentary analysis of student testimonials and a student questionnaire. This research finds evidence of synergies between the Rogerian modality and the professional practices of the author, not least in the domain of creativity and critical reflection. The study recommends an incremental and sustainable embedding of inclusive practices in teaching and a post-study dialogical reflection with the research participants on their perceptions of professional standards and quality in higher education with a view to further enhancing practice.

Keywords: Rogerian psychotherapy, humanist theory, action research, student-centred learning, teacher education

1. Introduction

A number of theoretical insights and practical skills applications, from the Rogerian humanist-therapeutic modality, have been applied to the field of education in recent decades (Rogers 1961; 1978; 1980; 2013; 2020). These insights and practices are amongst approaches that have directly contributed to holistic student-centred learning (SCL) in the field of education. The term SCL, while widespread, is not easily defined (O'Neill & McMahon c.2005, p. 30). It is characterised as: self-directed, learner-focused, autonomous, independent, collaborative, experiential, authentic, problem-based and constructivist (Sparrow *et al.*

(2000), cited in Tangney 2012, p. 32). SCL contrasts sharply with traditional teacher-centred methodologies where the learner is largely passive and lacks autonomy (Beaten *et al.* 2010, p. 245). In SCL, the student voice and ownership of learning are facilitated (Harris *et al.* 2013, p. 30).

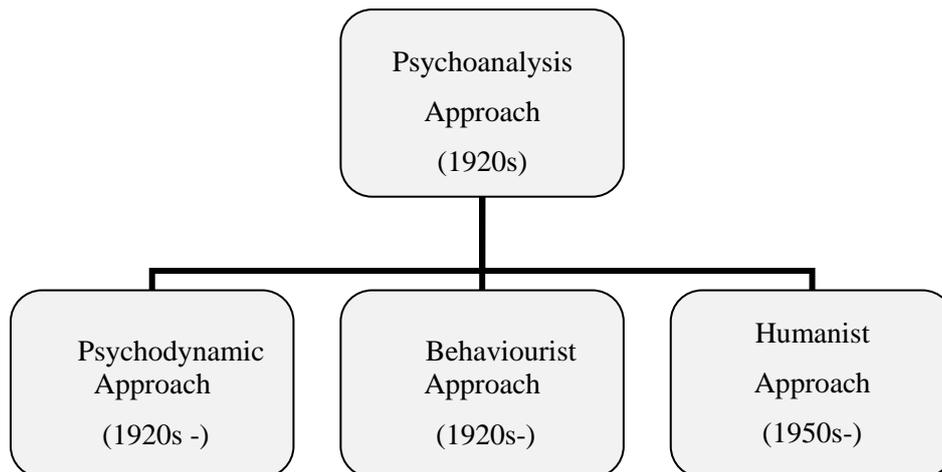
As a teacher educator, I seek to model best SCL practice. Within that context, the aim of this article, is to investigate my own teaching practices from a Rogerian humanist-therapeutic perspective with a view to a more informed, and enhanced, SCL practice. Objectives include: to conduct a literature analysis study of the Rogerian humanist approach, with an emphasis on SCL, and to critically reflect on my own student-centred learning practices, by means of evidence-based primary research. Methodologically, this is an action-research self-reflexive study. From a primary research perspective, the data gathering tools employed include a documentary textual analysis of student testimonials and student questionnaires.

The originality of this research is the interrogation of one educator's SCL practice (my own) using a Rogerian lens. For this reason, and respecting Rogerian person-centred philosophy, the pronouns 'I' and 'my' are used when referring to my professional practice. A limitation is the investigation of one selected psychotherapeutic-educational approach, to the exclusion of others.

2. The Rogerian Approach and Student-centred Learning

To provide the necessary context for this self-reflexive investigation, it is helpful to first clarify the Rogerian psychological approach, and establish synergies between the Rogerian approach and SCL. Within the Rogerian humanist-therapeutic perspective learning is client/person/learner/student-centred or led (Rogers 1980, pp. 114-117; 229-312). It is argued that the origins of SCL are found in Rogers' work (Tangney 2014, p. 266). Therefore, in seeking to understand SCL, it is helpful to situate Rogers (1902-1987) within the field of psychoanalytical psychology, with its emergent branches: psychodynamic psychology, humanist psychology and behaviourist psychology. (See Figure 1) and establish defining features of the Rogerian approach.

Figure 1. Historical emergence of psychological approaches
(Adapted from Matthew & O'Neill, 2021)



Psychoanalytical psychology had its origins in the work of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who published his seminal work, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, in 1920. In this work he outlined defining elements of the psychoanalytical approach, including the ‘talking cure’, the role of hypnosis in therapeutic healing, the role of the ‘free association’ method, and the structures of Id, Ego and Superconscious. While his contribution has been much debated, De Sousa contends that Freudian theory has still much to offer understandings of consciousness in cognitive neuroscience (De Sousa 2011). Freud’s contribution was built upon by his contemporaries Alfred Adler (1870-1937) and Carl G. Jung (1875- 1961). Adler’s holistic, communal and educational psycho-therapeutic view of the human person, contrasted sharply with Freud’s individualistic model (Adler, 1992). In the Adlerian model responsibility falls to the educator to promote the “free artistic creation” of the pupil within the context of interpersonal relationships (Adler 1979, p. 137). Here we find synergies with social constructivism as proposed by Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner (Bruner 1978; Vygotsky 1978; Derobertis, 2014, p.411). Jung placed emphasis on individuals’ lived experiences and future aspirations and contributed notions of the collective unconscious, synchronicity and archetypes, among others (Jung 1969). Following these developments, in the 1920’s the psychoanalysis movement became further influenced by the newly emerging Behaviourist movement, and by the 1950’s, a new form of psychoanalytical psychology was established - existential-humanistic therapy - proponents of which were Albert Ellis, Rollo May, Irvin Yalom, Otto Rank and Carl Rogers (Matthews & O’Neill, 2021).

Rogers advocates authentic, real-world learning, underpinned by the ‘core conditions’ *empathy*, *unconditional positive regard*, and *congruence*. Empathy refers to “entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it”, a process that

requires deep and focused active listening, and frequent checking for accuracy (Rogers 1920, p. 142; Rogers & Farson, 2015). In educational terms, it is the teacher's attempt to understand the personal meaning of the learning experience for students. (Rogers 1920, p. 307) and to listen with understanding (Rogers 1961, p. 331-332; Rogers & Farson, 2015). Unconditional positive regard (or caring) is a condition for growth and requires a genuine caring and/or nurturance on the part of the educator (Rogers, 1946, p. 52). It accepts the uniqueness of the learner- with their own feelings, attitudes, and perceptions - and helps them to make sense of their world in a way that significant learning can take place (Rogers 1961, p. 283-284). Congruence is the term that Rogers gives to authentic, or real-world, learning (Rogers 1920, p. 15). Rogers argues that when an individual is congruent, they are real, genuine, sincere, honest and trust-worthy; not a "polite professional front" merely playing a part (Rogers 1961, p. 61).

The above Rogerian core conditions are a pathway to growth which, in the humanist tradition, are correlated with the concept of self-actualisation (Rogers 1951:489; Maslow 1943). Of course, growth, as a concept, pre-dates Rogers and his contemporaries. John Dewey's (1859-1952) notion of learning as 'growth', for example, is evident in Roger's thinking (Dewey 1916, p. 56; Noddings, 2007, pp. 26-27). Rogers was also familiar with growth as a defining theme in Gestalt therapy (Perls, Hefferline & Goodman, 1951). Rogers and Freiberg's (1994) idea of therapeutic client-centredness encapsulates the idea of the growth culminating in the self-actualised person, resulting from relationships that are genuine, empathic, and unconditionally accepting and trusting. This is reminiscent of Abraham Maslow's (1973) model of an ascending hierarchy of learner needs, which ranged from physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, to esteem, and finally self-actualisation. Citing Snowball, Steward et al. write that belonging is a crucial element of learning: "(a) lack of connection can manifest in feelings of isolation and insecurities that negatively impact motivation and engagement in learning strategies" (Snowball 2014; Steward et al 2020, p. 3). Furthermore, for self-actualisation to occur, SCL initiatives need to foster a sense of belonging within the learning community and a sense of mastery and achievement - otherwise referred to as self-efficacy, a concept promoted by Albert Bandura, and which means self-belief in the ability to succeed in specific situations (Bandura, 1977).

Over recent decades there have been a a number of critiques of the Rogerian approach- particularly as applied to educational contexts. Examples include that is simply impractical and does not attend to individual and gender communication preferences (Geller, 1982), that that his concept of ontology is flawed, that his research methods lack rigour (River, 2018) and that an eclectic approach is actually more effective than a purist form of client-centred therapy (Kensit, 2010).

3. Methods

Methodologically, the framework for this self-reflexive study was action research (AR), which is fitting, since the researcher sought to enhance SCL practice. The data gathering methods included an initial documentary analysis of student testimonials followed by an MS Forms student questionnaire. In an AR Cycle (2014-2015) the selected student testimonials

pertaining to my teaching and learning practice (n=13) were independently collated by a colleague who nominated me for an institute teaching award in the academic year: the *Galway-Mayo President's Award for Teaching Excellence*. A documentary and thematic analysis of the testimonials, involving repetitive readings and a textual mapping analysis, was carried out manually, using MS Excel as a coding tool (see Table 1). Dominant themes aligned with the humanist tradition were identified and their frequency established, among them: mentoring and nurturance, creativity, passion, active teaching methods and promotion of critical thinking, and inclusivity (the latter having relatively low frequency). The strength of this investigation was its analysis of student voice (by means of the documentary analysis of testimonials). Limitations include the relatively small number of testimonials investigated (n=13) and the absence of observations and dialogical reflections by colleagues, external examiners and management.

In a subsequent AR Cycle (2021-2022) it was decided to build on this earlier AR study, and focus on the theme of *inclusivity*- one of the lower scoring categories identified (see below). One strategy that had been introduced, in the interim, to enhance inclusivity in my practice, was intentional application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in my teaching. I designed and delivered a UDL training workshop for students prior to School Placement, and a 10-question student-perspective questionnaire was designed to critically assess the effectiveness of the UDL training. This questionnaire was distributed to years 3 and 4 students on one teacher education programme, in GMIT: the *BSc in Education (Honours) (Design, Graphics and Construction)* programme. Students were invited to volunteer to participate in the study. Out of a total of 38 students, 20 completed the questionnaire: a 55% return rate. Sampling was both purposeful and convenient: given that it is a self-reflexive study, it was necessary to work purposefully with cohorts that I teach, and, as the module leader and lecturer for school placement modules on the programme, convenience sampling was appropriate. Following an explanation to students about the study and a discussion on consent requirements, the students were forwarded the MS Forms questionnaire link. Students were informed in writing (at the start of the questionnaire) that by completing and submitting the questionnaire they were consenting to the data being used for the purposes of research into my ongoing professional development, with potential dissemination, and that anonymity would be maintained. The questions related to: their understanding of UDL (Q.1), its benefits (Q.2), its implementation in teaching (Q. 3-5), the impact, or otherwise of the UDL training workshop (Q. 6&7), suggestions for further training (Q. 8), applications of UDL in School Placement (Q.9) and the most significant learnings on UDL and its applications, from the training workshop (Q.10).

4. Research Findings

As indicated above, a thematic analysis of the students' testimonial abstracts (n=13) was conducted, by means of repetitive or recurring readings and a textual mapping analysis. This analytical process identified dominant themes, namely, *mentoring/nurturing; innovation/creativity; standards/professionalism; support/feedback; passion/enthusiasm; inspiration; teaching methods; and inclusion*. (See Table 1). This frequency analysis placed innovation and creativity as the highest score (n=11), followed by the promotion of critical

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thinking (n=9), passion/enthusiasm (n=8), inspiration (n=8), mentoring/nurturance (n=7), support (n=7), and effective teaching methods (n=7). Examples of the promotion of creativity, innovation and higher order critical thinking (using inquiry-based learning strategies) are found in innovative dissertation outputs: the development of original cross-curricular programmes, student-led development of educational software, and student-led developments of interactive learner resources in the field of technical education. Areas which received lower scores from students included ‘professional standards’ (n=4) and ‘inclusivity’ (n=4). While the theme of high educational standards was specified in testimonials by colleagues, examiners and management in my teaching award, this was not a theme that collectively emerged from the student testimonials. Similarly, the score on ‘inclusivity’ was relatively low (n=4). A disjunction between student perspectives and my own perspective, on these two themes, was identified.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis of Defining Teaching Features- Student Mapping Analysis

Stud	Mentor/ Nurture	Innov/ Creativity	Stand/ Profess	Support/ Feedbk	Critical Refl/ Thinking	Passion/ Enthus	Inspire	Teach Methods	Inclus
#1	x	x	x		x				
#2		x			x	x	x		
#3	x	x	x		x				
#4	x	x			x		x		
#5		x				x	x	x	
#6		x	x	x		x	x	x	
#7		x		x	x			x	x
#8		x		x	x		x	x	
#9	x				x	x	x	x	x
#10	x			x		x		x	
#11	x	x	x	x		x			x
#12		x			x	x	x		x
#13	x	x		x	x	x	x		
Freq	7	11	4	6	9	8	8	6	4

Sample testimonial extracts demonstrate direct synergies with the Rogerian-humanist tradition including:

... she brings a new and innovative approach to our lectures, none of which are ever boring. She is always inspirational and stimulating in encouraging us to become independent and critical thinkers.

[she] has a unique teaching style [and] arrange [sic] of teaching methods ... She would teach using cooperative learning, problem solving based learning, discussion, practical demonstration, role play and many more.

She also tries to teach us to ‘think outside the box’ and use our own imaginations

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With respect to the second data source - the student questionnaire - it was found that there was an increased awareness of inclusion and access among students (Q1), with one student indicating that Universal Design for Learning gives students an equal playing field and facilitates learning in ways that best suits them as individuals. Increased equity, engagement and motivation, together with decreased classroom management issues were cited as benefits (Q.2). A good level of understanding of the core principles of UDL and their implementation was demonstrated (Q.3-5) and increased awareness of access and inclusion in learning was demonstrated (Q. 6-7). Illustrative student quotes include:

- *I feel that I need to be even more aware now when entering the class to ask the co-operating teacher [which] students need help*
- *It has opened my eyes to students who may not be inclined to participate and it's not down to a lack of interest'; more so a lack of competence, confidence or ability to interact and engage in the lesson.*
- *It is important that we note the diversity in the classroom.*

In Q. 8, when asked to identify further UDL training needs, the areas of active learning methodologies, classroom management strategies (specifically when implementing UDL principles and strategies) and further training in educational technology were highlighted.

In Q. 9, when asked to identify UDL strategies to implement in School Placement, examples cited included: multiple presentation methods, student-led classrooms, inquiry and problem-based learning strategies, demonstrations, real-world examples, group tasks, video, use of alt text on teaching resources, and increased use of visuals. Finally, when asked 'What is your most significant learning in this (UDL) workshop, if any (Q. 10)?', responses included:

- *The importance of engaging students*
- *To be more aware of implementing the 3 principles of UDL*
- *I was surprised with how much UDL I already implemented in my lessons, but I now have a more defined meaning for why I do what I do.*
- *How large and broad an audience we have within the four walls of the classroom*
- *Being aware of different student requirements in a classroom*

Challenges for myself in UDL implementation with student teachers includes that a significant amount of additional time is required to train student teachers in UDL and that additional training and expertise is needed to assist lecturers and student placement tutors on

the teacher education programme to implement and assess UDL applications, if they are to be sustainable in the future.

5. Discussion

SCL is an approach to learning “based on the philosophy that the student is at the heart of the learning process” (Kok Seng 2014, p.143). This perspective is holistic and attends to emotional (or affective) and cognitive aspects of learning and growth (Tangney 2012, p. 59). This study established that the origins of SCL may be found in the Rogerian- humanist client/person/learner/student-centred perspective on learning (Rogers 1980, pp. 114-117; 229- 312; Tangney 2014, p. 266). Defining features of this approach are collaboration, ownership of learning, and the development of 21st century critical thinking skills. All of these defining features were specifically identified in my practice, in this study, pointing to a positive alignment between my professional practice and the Rogerian tradition (Steward et al., 2020).

Within the humanist tradition, growth is a notable theme, and is correlated with the concept of self-actualisation (Rogers 1951:489; Maslow 1943). It is manifested in creativity, problem-solving, real-world application, holistic and nurturing learning experiences and collaborative inter-relational endeavours, as indicators of growth. The study confirms evidence of growth elements in my practice, not least innovation and creativity, the promotion of critical thinking, passion/enthusiasm, inspiration, mentoring/nurturance and effective teaching methods.

Literature critiques of SCL include that it can meet resistance in practice: some teachers resist the transition from a traditional teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach (Kok Seng 2014, p. 147; Miulescu & Tripon 2016, p. 331), and not all students like SCL environments (SCLEs). Some students can be uncomfortable with, and confused by, self-directed learning (Joon Lee, S.& Maribe Branch 2018). Others feel that they are not progressing with quality learning: Alana Blackwell Day (2015) identified the negative impact of poorly designed SCL assignments, and the inadequacy of SCL tasks of a lower-order nature, where students may be active and engaged, but not actually learning anything of note. In my own practice, I met with some, but minimal, resistance. However, concerns were expressed by students that inclusivity strategies, such as UDL, are time demanding and add to workload.

The tension between the individual and community is also in evidence in SCL debates and critiques: McKenna (2013) highlights the excessive individualism, of much SCL theory and practice and its lack of a socio-systemic understanding of learning within both disciplines and institutions. Citing O’Brien, Mills & Cohen (2009), McKenna (2013, p.2) suggests a learning-centred (as opposed to learner-centred) approach might address this shortcoming, as also collaborative social learning strategies in the social-constructivist tradition. Literature debates and critiques point to the need for educating learners about the benefits of SCL, the provision of accessible content knowledge to inform all SCL activities, and the design of high quality SCL activities that measurably advance quality learning.

The significance of belonging to a community of learners is politicised in communitarian forms of SCL which address issues of personal power, and place civic responsibility, democracy, social justice and power relations to the fore (Freire 1974; Rogers 1978; Rogers



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& Freiberg 1994). This latter aspect is explicitly acknowledged in UDL implementation, with its social justice values of equity and inclusion. The need to look beyond the self, and to establish a wider community of UDL practice (CoP) among SP co-ordinators, module leaders, lecturers and tutors that engages in collective training, planning, implementation and evaluation, is a necessary step for sustainability at programmatic level. This CoP can be expanded to include student teachers at the design, implementation and planning stages.

This study also identified certain disjunctions between my own perceptions and students' perceptions of my practice, as, for example, with respect to inclusion and professional standards, which requires further reflection. The study has reinforced the need to continue to engage with inclusivity strategies in my delivery with student teachers, and more effectively model best practice for students, in the line with Albert Bandura's social learning theory which posits that people learn from each other through observation, imitation and modelling (Bandura, 1965; 1977). Furthermore, an incremental approach to inclusivity, across the whole programme, is desirable, for sustainability, hence the need to formally establish a programme CoP. The explicit value of professional standards – while in evidence- requires enhancement via future interventions, that explicitly bridge the disjunction between my own perceptions of my professional practice and student-based evidence. A dialogical reflection with students on this point, enabling a more detailed articulation of their perceptions, could be an important opportunity for professional growth. Further education research, with and by pre-service teachers, in regard to national teacher education standards and codes of professional practice, would be beneficial. This is a future professional development target area, in field of quality assurance.

6. Conclusion

The main aim of the article was to investigate my professional teaching practices from a Rogerian humanist-therapeutic perspective with a view to enhanced practice, in the context of AR. Specifically, this study situated the Rogerian contribution to education within the humanist integrative therapeutic tradition and highlighted its student-centredness. Seminal texts- namely, primary Rogerian literature sources - were investigated, with a focus on SCL within the Rogerian tradition. Documentary analysis research found evidence of synergies between the Rogerian modality and my own professional practice, not least in the domains of nurturance, creativity, active teaching and learning strategies, and critical reflection. Areas identified, where there was an apparent disjunction between my own perceptions and those of my students, were inclusivity and professional standards. Recommendations arising out of this study, include an incremental embedding of inclusive practices beyond my personal practice, across the programme as a whole, involving programme colleagues/peers as a CoP, and structured dialogue with students on their perceptions of professional standards and quality in higher education, with a view to enhanced practice.

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