



FREEDOM TO PLAY STARTED WITH FREEDOM TO LEARN BY CARL ROGERS. I WAS INTRODUCED TO CARL ROGERS AT THE ACADEMY FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN AMSTERDAM, A VERY PROGRESSIVE INSTITUTE OF LEARNING. WE WERE ACTIVELY SEEKING AND FINDING THE ROLES OF FACILITATORS OF LEARNING, APPLYING SOME OF THE BELOW DISCUSSED PRINCIPLES TO OUR DAILY BEST (AND IMPROVING) PRACTICE. GAME BASED LEARNING PLAYED A BIG ROLE IN THAT. BART CHOUFOUR

WITH MANY THANKS TO C.J. WEIBEL WHO DISCUSSES THE PRINCIPLES AND APPLICATIONS OF FREEDOM TO LEARN IN HIS BLOG (2011) BELOW.

## **7 PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING**



## Freedom to Learn (Rogers – 1969)

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Rogers is recognized as one of the founders of human psychology, having developed the client centered approach to counseling and psychotherapy which has been widely used (Rogers, 1983, p. iii). In comparison with the foregoing theories of human motivation and agency, his theory of human learning, which will be summarized in this section, is broader in scope, and addresses not just the means by which a person is motivated, but the learner as a whole person.

Rogers presented his theory of learning in *Freedom to Learn* (1969), which he wrote while a resident fellow at the *Center for Studies of the Person* in La Jolla, CA. His goal was not to write about learning in terms of the “lifeless, sterile, futile, quickly forgotten stuff which is crammed into the mind of the poor helpless individual tied into his seat by the iron clad bonds of conformity” (p. 3), but rather the type of learning characterized by “the insatiable curiosity which drives the adolescent boy to absorb everything he can see or hear or read about gasoline engines in order to improve the efficiency and speed of his ‘hot-rod’” (p. 3). The student of this type of learning, he said, is “the student who says, ‘I am discovering, drawing in from the outside, and making that which is drawn in a real part of me’” (p. 3).

To further characterize the two types of learning already mentioned, Rogers described them as defining opposite ends of a continuum of meaning, feeling, and relevance. One end of the continuum he represented by the following poignant observation:

At one end of the scale is the kind of task psychologists sometimes set for their subjects—the learning of nonsense syllables. To memorize such items as *baz, ent, nep, arl, lud* and the like, is a difficult task. Because there is no meaning involved, these syllables are not easy to learn and are likely to be forgotten quickly.

We frequently fail to recognize that much of the material presented to students in the classroom has, for the student, the same perplexing, meaningless quality that the list of nonsense syllables has for us. This is especially true for the underprivileged child whose



background provides no context for the material with which he is confronted. But nearly every student finds that large portions of his curriculum are for him, meaningless. Thus education becomes the futile attempt to learn material which has no personal meaning.

Such learning involves the mind only. It is learning which takes place from the neck up. It does not involve feelings or personal meanings; it has no relevance for the whole person. (Rogers, 1969, pp. 3-4)

In contrast, he described the other end of the continuum in terms of significant, meaningful experiences, which are not easily forgotten:

When the toddler touches the warm radiator he learns for himself the meaning of the word, “hot”; he has learned a future caution in regard to all similar radiators; and he has taken in these learnings in a significant, involved way which will *not* be soon forgotten. Likewise the child who has memorized “two plus two equal four” may one day in his play with blocks or marbles suddenly realize, “Two and two *do* make four!” He has discovered something significant for himself, in a way which involves both his thoughts and feelings. Or the child who has laboriously acquired “reading skills” is caught up one day in a printed story, whether a comic book or an adventure tale, and realizes that words can have a magic power which lifts him out of himself into another world. He has now “really” learned to read. (Rogers, 1969, p. 4)

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Rogers (1969) listed five defining elements of significant or experiential learning:

1. *It has a quality of personal involvement* – Significant learning has a quality of personal involvement in which “the whole person in both his feeling and cognitive aspects [is] *in* the learning event” (p. 5).
2. *It is self-initiated* – “Even when the impetus or stimulus comes from the outside, the sense of discovery, of reaching out, of grasping and comprehending, comes from within” (p. 5).



3. *It is pervasive* – Significant learning “makes a difference in the behavior, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner” (p. 5).
4. *It is evaluated by the learner* – The learner knows “whether it is meeting his need, whether it leads toward what he *wants* to know, whether it illuminates the dark area of ignorance he is experiencing” (p. 5).
5. *Its essence is meaning* – “When such learning takes place, the element of meaning to the learner is built into the whole experience” (p. 5).

As an example of significant learning—the kind that illustrates his theory of freedom to learn—Rogers cited the informal notes kept by Barbara J. Shiel, a teacher, who out of despair and frustration decided to try a drastic experiment in promoting experiential learning in her sixth grade class. In the experiment Mrs. Shiel introduced the concept of *work contracts*. These were ditto sheets that contained a list of all of the subjects the class was to study, along with a list of suggestions for study under each, and a space for students to write their plans in each area:

As soon as the contract was made, the child began to study or work on his plan. He could work as long as he needed or wanted to work on a task or project. Because I was not free to discard the state-devised curriculum time schedule, I explained the weekly time-subject blocks to the children—this was to be a consideration in their planning. We also discussed sequential learning, especially in math, mastering a skill before proceeding to the next level of learning. They discovered the text provided an introduction to a skill, demonstrated the skill, and provided exercises to master it and tests to check achievement. When they felt they were ready to go on, they were free to do so. They set their own pace, began at their own level, and went as far as they were able or self-motivated to go. (Rogers, 1969, pp. 17-18)

Since evaluation was self-initiated and respected by the teacher, there was no need for cheating to achieve success. We discovered that “failure” is only a word, that there is a difference between “failure” and making a mistake, and that mistakes are a part of the learning process. (Rogers, 1969, p. 18)

One cannot measure the difference in attitude, the increased interest, the growing pride in self-improvement, but one is aware that they exist. (Rogers, 1969, p. 19)



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The experience of Mrs. Shiel's experiment is illustrative of ten principles of learning that Rogers (1969, pp. 157-164) abstracted from his own experience:

*1. Human beings have a natural potentiality for learning.* "They are curious about their world, until and unless this curiosity is blunted by their experience in our educational system" (p. 157).

*2. Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for his own purposes.* "A somewhat more formal way of stating this is that a person learns significantly only those things which he perceives as being involved in the maintenance of or the enhancement of his own self" (p. 158).

*3. Learning which involves a change in self organization—in the perception of oneself—is threatening and tends to be resisted.*

Why has there been so much furor, sometimes even lawsuits, concerning the adolescent boy who comes to school with long hair? Surely the length of his hair makes little objective difference. The reason seems to be that if I, as a teacher or administrator, accept the value which he places on non-conformity then it threatens the value which I have placed on conforming to social demands. If I permit this contradiction to exist I may find myself changing, because I will be forced to a reappraisal of some of my values. (p. 159)

*4. Those learnings which are threatening to the self are more easily perceived and assimilated when external threats are at a minimum.*

The boy who is retarded in his reading already feels threatened and inadequate because of this deficiency. When he is forced to attempt to read aloud in front of the group, when he is ridiculed for his efforts, when his grades are a vivid reflection of his failure, it is no surprise that he may go through several years of school with no perceptible increase in his reading ability. On the other hand, a supportive, understanding environment and a lack of grades, or



an encouragement of self evaluation, remove the external threats and permit him to make progress because he is no longer paralyzed by fear. [1] (pp. 159-160)

*5. When threat to the self is low, experience can be perceived in differentiated fashion and learning can proceed.*

When [the learner] is in an environment in which he is assured of personal security and when he becomes convinced that there is no threat to his ego, he is once more free to...move forward in the process of learning. (p. 161)

*6. Much significant learning is acquired through doing.* “Placing the student in direct experiential confrontation with practical problems, social problems, ethical and philosophical problems, personal issues, and research problems, is one of the most effective modes of promoting learning” (p. 162).

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*7. Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.* “When he chooses his own directions, helps to discover his own learning resources, formulates his own problems, decides his own course of action, lives with the consequences of these choices, then significant learning is maximized” (p. 162).

*8. Self-initiated learning which involves the whole person of the learner—feelings as wells as intellect—is the most lasting and pervasive.*

We have discovered this in psychotherapy, where it is the totally involved learning of oneself by oneself which is most effective. This is not the learning which takes place “only from the neck up.” It is a “gut level” type of learning which is profound and pervasive. It can also occur in the tentative discovery of a new self-generated idea or in the learning of a difficult skill, or in the act of artistic creation—a painting, a poem, a sculpture. It is the whole person who “let’s himself go” in these creative learnings. An important element in these situations is that the learner *knows* it is his own learning and thus can hold to it or



relinquish it in the face of a more profound learning without having to turn to some authority for corroboration of his judgment. (pp. 162-163)

*9. Independence, creativity, and self-reliance are all facilitated when self-criticism and self-evaluation are basic and evaluation by others is of secondary importance.*

If a child is to grow up to be independent and self-reliant he must be given opportunities at an early age not only to make his own judgments and his own mistakes but to evaluate the consequences of these judgments and choices. (p. 163).

*10. The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change.*

If our present culture survives it will be because we have been able to develop individuals for whom *change* is the central fact of life and who have been able to live comfortably with this central fact. It means that they will not be concerned, as so many are today, that their past learning is inadequate to enable them to cope with current situations. They will instead have the comfortable expectation that it will be continuously necessary to incorporate new and challenging learnings about ever-changing situations. (pp. 163-164)

Rogers' theory of learning also included ten principles that define the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning. Rogers (1983) summarized this role by stating that "the primary task of the teacher is to *permit* [italics added] the student to learn, to feed his or her own curiosity" (p. 18). Rogers' ten principles of facilitation are complementary to his ten principles of learning. Together they form a human learning theory that emphasizes learner agency, connection, and affect. These ten principles are as follows (summarized from Rogers, 1969, pp. 164-166):

*1. The facilitator has much to do with setting the initial mood or climate of the group or class experience.* "If his own basic philosophy is one of trust in the group and in the individuals



who compose the group, then this point of view will be communicated in many subtle ways” (p. 164).

*2. The facilitator helps to elicit and clarify the purposes of the individuals in the class as well as the more general purposes of the group.*

*3. He relies upon the desire of each student to implement those purposes which have meaning for him, as the motivational force behind significant learning.*

*4. He endeavors to organize and make easily available the widest possible range of resources for learning.*

*5. He regards himself as a flexible resource to be utilized by the group.*

*6. In responding to expressions in the classroom group, he accepts both the intellectual content and the emotionalized attitudes, endeavoring to give each aspect the approximate degree of emphasis which it has for the individual or group.*

*7. As the acceptant classroom climate becomes established, the facilitator is able increasingly to become a participant learner, a member of the group, expressing his views as those of one individual only.*

*8. He takes the initiative in sharing himself with the group—his feelings as well as his thoughts—in ways which do not demand nor impose but represent simply a personal sharing which students may take or leave.*

*9. Throughout the classroom experience, he remains alert to the expressions indicative of deep or strong feelings. “He endeavors to understand these from the person’s point of view and to communicate his empathic understanding...he helps to bring them into the open for constructive understanding and use by the group” (pp. 165-166).*





10. In his functioning as a facilitator of learning, the leader endeavors to recognize and accept his own limitations. "He realizes that he can only grant freedom to his students to the extent that he is comfortable in giving such freedom" (p. 166).

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Weibell, C. J. (2011). *Principles of learning: 7 principles to guide personalized, student-centered learning in the technology-enhanced, blended learning environment*. Retrieved July 4, 2011 from [<https://principlesoflearning.wordpress.com>].