
EDUCATION - THE HUMANISTIC CHALLENGE

by

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This article describes how the need for a humanistically oriented reappraisal of our education system is now greater than ever. It goes on to describe some of the characteristics that may, when taken together, add up to a Humanistic Education. Finally, an example is given of a Higher Education programme which displays many Humanistic aspects.

This article owes much to the work of Carl Rogers, in my view certainly the most influential Humanistic psychologist, writer, scientist and therapist, living or dead. Over the last fifty years or so Rogers has originated many ideas, not only in the world of therapy, but also in education, research methods, personal growth, and more recently in the work of the peace movement where he has taken a number of personal initiatives. It remains something of a puzzle as to why his ideas seem not to be as widely understood or appreciated in this country, as in others although the signs are now that this is changing.

The perspective taken by this article is, then, largely that of the Person Centred Approach, which provides us with a framework for challenging conventional wisdom in the

educational process, and enables us to build a more relevant approach to what is perhaps our most pervasive and influential social institution. Rogers and the ideas of the Person Centred Approach (PCA) do not stand alone, either in today's terms or historically. A tradition of 'alternative thinkers' about education can be traced back through history beginning perhaps with Rousseau and including A.S. Neil, Montessori, Pestalozzi and others leading to John Dewey, John Holt and Carl Rogers himself. This alternative tradition contains much which today would be called 'Humanistic', but its influence although stronger in the primary sector of British Education, has had only marginal impact on secondary and tertiary education. The Free School movement, and the initiatives that have been taken under the 'education otherwise' clause have, in the main, been unable to challenge the monolithic structures of state funded secondary or higher education in the U.K.

Today, our education system is on the verge of, if not actually in, complete chaos. Continuing systematic cuts in the provision for education at all levels, coupled with an increasing sense of frustration

and low morale amongst teachers combines with an increasing sense of lack of purpose and disillusionment among many young people surveying a shrinking job market lead us to wonder if education in its present form can survive. An important question might be, 'Should education in its present form survive anyway?' Let's examine this proposition further from a slightly different perspective.

Anyone who has read Fritjof Capra's 'The Turning Point' will already be familiar with what follows, but I make no apology for repeating these things as they are of paramount importance in any consideration of how our education system must change in order to accommodate new models, new ways of thinking and new ways of being.

At any point in time there is a generally accepted world view amongst scientists and lay people - a pattern by which we make sense out of our perceived reality. Thus, at one time, it was perfectly clear that the earth was flat, was the centre of the universe and the sun revolved around it. When Copernicus advanced the view that the world was a sphere revolving around the sun, people had to confront the possibility that the former paradigm was greatly in error, and that here was a whole new way of perceiving the universe. They had to face the possibility of shifting from one paradigm to another. This was a real problem, because one of the characteristics of a paradigm shift is that it is an all or nothing situation. You can't believe partly in the old paradigm and partly in the new, they are mutually incompati-

ble. You must choose. The shift that took place into the new paradigm was painful, and it changed peoples' perceptions not only of cosmology but of man's place in the Universe. It affected religion, literature, poetry, philosophy - in short it changed the structure of our culture.

It may be that now we are facing not just one, but a number of simultaneous paradigm shifts. The old pattern is disappearing and this leaves us uneasy and uncertain. As science has developed it has become more and more evident that the search for a basic material unit of the Universe is paradoxical. It seems that fundamental particles are simply patterns of oscillating energy. In this new paradigm, matter, time and space disappear as absolutes along with the apparent solidity of our world. On a similar theme, it has long been an unquestioned axiom that cause and effect are a linear chain, and all events are eventually explicable by discovering the cause. But new ways of thinking hold that living systems can only be understood by recognising that there are reciprocal cause-effect interactions. These and many other new understandings of science are forcing us into another paradigm shift. It all seems to add up to the fact that science - the very cornerstone of our modern age - is not simply a cause/effect system, but a complex description of the reciprocal cause/effect process by which the Universe is continually creating itself. It no longer is science as we once knew it, but approaches the mystical and transcendent.

Other challenges to the old paradigm come easily to mind - from the work of the Biofeedback researchers, work on healing energies and auras, the power of meditation and so on.

So, where does all this leave us?

Reality as we have thus far known it - that of time, matter and space is no longer certain in any fundamental sense. Science, for so long our tool for understanding is itself going through striking changes. The much emphasised law of entropy, of the tendency towards deterioration, can be seen as only one side of the coin. On the other side is a formative tendency, the capacity for creative change into new more complex states. This is the new world into which we are moving, one in which the old realities must make way for the new. We are facing a combination of paradigm shifts which may be more powerful than anything the world has known before. The possibilities both for destruction and for creative change are enormous.

But I'd like to pause, just for a moment and remind myself that most of what I've said would not have been new or surprising to Lao Tzu, or to don Juan of whom Castenada writes. Perhaps here in the West it has taken all this time to arrive at the beginning.

These then, are some of the challenges that face us in all aspects of life. It is to the Education system to which we must now turn as it is how we choose to educate ourselves and our children which will determine whether our culture

survives these new challenges or not.

I guess that there would be amongst the humanistically oriented, a large measure of agreement so far as goals for our education system are concerned. Leaving aside the organisation of education about which I guess there might be more debate, most of us would hope that from education a person:

*would become a critical learner.
would be capable of intelligent
choice and self discipline.*

*would have acquired knowledge
relevant to that person's real
life.*

*would be able to use this
knowledge flexibly.*

*would be able to take self
initiated and responsible action.*

*would have found learning
enjoyable and acquired the skills
to be a life long learner.*

*would have become aware of
him/herself to some significant
degree as a physical, emotional,
intellectual and spiritual being.*

This seems to me to be a modest list of goals for education, but unfortunately, for the majority of people, the experience of the education system is that these goals are rarely, if ever, achieved. Of course, some of us including myself, survive our education and even profit from it. Alas though, analysis shows that in the main education fails most of us and serves to impart a sense of failure in children which stays with them throughout their adult life.

As it presently exists, our education system has a number of characteristics which severely

militate against any chance of creative change and thus the ability to cope in a fundamentally changing world, and I'd like to itemise them. (I have adapted some of what follows from Carl Rogers' book 'Freedom to Learn for the 80's', Pub. C. Merrill 1983)

The examination measures the extent to which the student has received and can recall the information transmitted to him/her. (Actually, it is a source of mystery to me why a system should choose a means of assessing knowledge and capability in a way the person will never be called upon in real life to repeat).

The Teacher is the possessor of power, the student has none. Control is always exercised downwards.

Rule by authority is the accepted policy.

Trust is at a minimum. Most notable is the teacher's distrust of the learner. People will not learn without strict supervision.

Students are best governed by being kept in an intermittent or constant state of fear. This fear may be of physical punishment, ridicule, scorn or public failure.

Democracy and its values are ignored and scorned in practice.

There is no place for the whole person in education, only for the intellect and occasionally for the physical, though these things are always kept separate.

Of course we can all think of schools, colleges, individual teachers and classes which are not like

this, but the above characteristics are all too familiar. The values they represent are, on the whole, reflections of much wider cultural values. One importance of education systems is that they are a major means of transmitting cultural norms and values from one generation to the next. I don't think it's an exaggeration to claim that if we are to promote humanistic values in schools and colleges, which in comparison to traditional capitalistic values are actually revolutionary, then we need ourselves to become revolutionaries. If this puts some people off, I don't apologise, since in this context being a revolutionary implies a fundamental shift of attitude away from treating people as objects to be manipulated towards treating people as individuals to be respected and trusted. Being revolutionary also implies a confrontation with power. The politics of traditional education is clear. 'Power over' is the important concept, that is people must be 'overpowered'. A Humanistic revolution is to do with 'empowering' people. The strategies for holding and exercising power are the rewarding of grades and vocational opportunities and the use of aversive, punitive and fear creating methods such as treating examination failure with public scorn and the with-holding of career opportunities.

What then might a humanistic education system look like?

Again, I am indebted to Carl Rogers when I describe some of its characteristics as follows:

There is a precondition for the

promotion of humanistic values. It is that those at the top, those perceived by others as being in authority must be sufficiently secure in themselves and their relationships with others that they experience an essential trust in the capacity of others to think and learn for themselves. In short they regard humans as trustworthy organisms. If this precondition can be met, then a Humanistic education system may have some or all of these characteristics:

The teacher shares with others, including crucially the students, the responsibility for the learning process.

The facilitative teacher provides learning resources from within herself and her own experiences, from books and materials and from community experience.

The student develops her own learning programme either alone or in cooperation with others.

The focus is mainly on fostering the continuing process of learning. Thus the content, while significant, takes second place to the need to develop enduring learning skills.

Discipline is essentially self discipline. In an acceptant climate the learner learns to replace external with self discipline.

Evaluation of the extent and significance of learning is made primarily by the learner - allowing for feedback from others including peers and the teacher/facilitator.

A facilitative learning climate is provided.

The provision of a definable kind of facilitative learning environment is crucial to Humanistic Education. This needs some further discussion. Readers familiar with the basic philosophy of the Person-Centred Approach will know that Rogers described three main characteristics of an effective, growth promoting climate in the therapeutic relationship. The first, and perhaps most important of these is the existence of empathy. This means that the therapist is able to listen empathically, understanding and appreciating something of both the content of the client's words and the emotional significance of those words (and deeds). Research indicates that in all effective therapy, empathy is the most critical factor. The second condition is described variously as congruence or authenticity, sometimes 'realness'. Therapy seems to proceed more effectively when the client perceives no professional facade or technique. This implies too, a significant degree of personal awareness on the part of the therapist and a willingness to risk being authentically human. The third condition is that the therapist is able to exhibit a warm and caring attitude towards the client and can behave in an accepting, non judgemental manner.

If these three conditions are present in a therapeutic relationship, then indications are that effective and lasting therapeutic change is likely, though not of course guaranteed. It is important to realise that these three factors form a hypothesis; they are not meant as a prescription, but something to be tested against our own experience and verified or not.

In the USA, and later in West Germany, researchers set out to discover if teachers high in these three characteristics were more or less effective in their classrooms than teachers low in these three qualities. Without going into the methodological details (which can be found in 'Freedom to Learn for the 80's'), the research found after assessing nearly 4000 hours of classroom interaction from 550 elementary and secondary schools that there was a clear correlation between the facilitative conditions provided by the teacher and the academic and personal achievements of the students. In other words 'high rated' teachers provided classes in which students had a more positive self concept than was found in other groups, initiated more behaviour in the classroom and showed fewer disciplinary problems with a lower absentee rate. In one study 25 black first graders with 'high rated' teachers showed an average increase in IQ from 85 to 94. In comparison, 25 with 'low rated' teachers showed no change whatsoever over a similar period of 9 months. When this work was repeated in West German schools the students with 'high rated' teachers showed significantly enhanced intellectual processes, were more spontaneous, were more interested in what they were doing and said more of what they felt and thought. They also showed a greater ability as measured by standard tests than students with 'low rated' teachers.

It pays to be human in the classroom!

Although the work I've cited was with secondary school age students,

'Freedom to Learn for the 80's' has a number of living examples of Person Centred principles being adopted at college and University level, with encouraging results. In the UK I know of very few State funded humanistically oriented educational organisations, but it is worth mentioning one very briefly.

I work at the School for Independent Study at the North East London Polytechnic. The School (SIS) has for some ten years offered an educational experience to anyone who can benefit from it - quite untypical of anything else in British Higher Education. The School offers an opportunity to people to identify their own learning needs and to plan a programme of study that will go some way towards meeting those needs. Thus there is no curriculum, no syllabus that exists prior to the students. People can, and do, propose study programmes in almost any and every area of experience from the engineering problems of deep sea oil drilling, to the history, development and use of the bass guitar, to the therapeutic needs of drug addicts, to the problems faced by Black children in Schools, and so on. The Staff role is a facilitative one, they help the students to explore their own needs and to draw up appropriate plans and they help with method and process. Each student is individually matched up with an appropriate specialist tutor to help and advise on the content of the programme. Students work as individuals on their 'specialist' programmes and also in groups, in collaboration with each other, on more general social and community problems. School staff offer a variety of optional workshops in

such things as communication skills, computing, working in groups, literacy and numeracy skills. The students also propose their own means of assessment and describe the objectives which are to be assessed. Every student's programme is, therefore, unique. At present the School offers programmes at Diploma, Degree and Masters level. Over ten years a couple of thousand students have been through this process. Most have succeeded even though many of them have been described as failures in their previous education.

The School is a real example of how humanistic ideas can be put into practice and made to work. The student has more power because he/she maintains so much control over his/her own educational process. The students are trusted to

a far higher degree than is usual elsewhere to know what is best for themselves, and they are treated as responsible self actualising individuals. And it works. The only tragedy is that other institutions have not been able to do something similar.

The School for Independent Study is not the answer to the crisis that education finds itself in, but it is an example of what can be done in response to that crisis. What is important is that educators at all levels begin the process of confronting the inherent problems of a collapsing system. Perhaps Humanistic Psychology should become more vocal in stimulating that confrontation and doing more both within and outside the State system in proposing alternative models.

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