



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY SENTRY EDITION 60

CARL R.
ROGERS

ON
BECOMING
A PERSON



A distinguished psychologist's guide to personal growth and creativity

13

Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning

This is the shortest chapter in the book but if my experience with it is any criterion, it is also the most explosive. It has a (to me) amusing history.

I had agreed, months in advance, to meet with a conference organized by Harvard University on "Classroom Approaches to Influencing Human Behavior." (was requested to put on a demonstration of "student-centered teaching" - teaching based upon therapeutic principles as I had been endeavoring to apply then, in education. I felt that to use two hours with a sophisticated group to try help to them formulate their own purposes, and to respond to their feelings as they did so, would be highly artificial and unsatisfactory. I did not know what I would do or present.

At this juncture I took off for Mexico on one of our winter quarter trips, did some painting, writing, and photography, and immersed myself in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. I am sure that his honest willingness to call a spade a spade influenced me more than I realized.

As the time came near to return I had to face up to my obligation. I recalled that I had sometimes been able to initiate very meaningful class discussions by expressing some highly personal opinion of my own, and then endeavoring to understand and accept the often very divergent reactions and feelings of the students. This seemed a sensible way of handling my Harvard assignment.

So I sat down to write, as honestly as I could, what my experiences had been with teaching, as this term is defined in the dictionaries, and likewise my experience with learning. I was far away from psychologists, educators, cautious colleagues. I simply put down what I felt, with assurance that if I had not got it correctly, the discussion would help to set me on the right track.

I may have been naive, but I did not consider the material inflammatory. After all the conference members were knowledgeable, self-critical teachers, whose main common bond was an interest in the discussion method in the classroom.

I met with the conference, I presented my views as written out below, taking only a very few moments, and threw the meeting open for discussion. I was hoping for a response, but I did not expect the tumult which followed. Feelings ran high. It seemed I was threatening their jobs, I

was obviously saying things I didn't mean, etc., etc. And occasionally a quiet voice of appreciation arose from a teacher who had felt these things but never dared to say them.

I daresay that not one member of the group remembered that this meeting was billed as a demonstration of student-centered teaching. But I hope that in looking back each realized that he had lived an experience of student-centered teaching. I refused to defend myself by replying to the questions and attacks which came from every quarter. I endeavored to accept and empathize with the indignation, the frustration, the criticisms which they felt. I pointed out that I had merely expressed some very personal views of my own. I had not asked nor expected others to agree. After much storm, members of the group began expressing, more and more frankly, their own significant feelings about teaching — often feelings divergent from mine, often feelings divergent from each - other. It was a very thought-provoking session. I question whether any participant in that session has ever forgotten it.

The most meaningful comment came from one of the conference members the next morning as I was preparing to leave the city. All he said was, "You kept more people awake last night!"

I took no steps to have this small fragment published. My views on psychotherapy had already made me a "controversial figure" among psychologists and psychiatrists. I had no desire to add educators to the list. The statement was widely duplicated however by members of the conference and several years later two journals requested permission to publish it.

After this lengthy historical build-up, you may find the statement itself a let-down. Personally I have never felt it to be incendiary. It still expresses some of my deepest views in the field of education.

I WISH TO PRESENT some very brief remarks, in the hope that if they bring forth any reaction from you, I may get some new light on my own ideas.

I find it a very troubling thing to *think*, particularly when I think about my own experiences and try to extract from those experiences the meaning that seems genuinely inherent in them. At first such thinking is very satisfying, because it seems to discover sense and pattern in a whole host of discrete events. But then it very often becomes dismaying, because I realize how ridiculous these thoughts which have much value to me, would seem to most people. My impression is that if I try to find the meaning of my own experience it leads me, nearly always, in directions regarded as absurd.

So in the next three or four minutes, I will try to digest some of the meanings which have come to me from my classroom experience and the experience I have had in individual and group therapy. They are in no way intended as conclusions for some one else, or a guide to what others should do or be. They are the very tentative meanings, as of April 1952, which my experience has had for me, and some of the bothersome questions which their absurdity raises. I will put each idea or meaning in a separate lettered paragraph, not because they are in any particular logical order, but because each meaning is separately important to me.

- a. I may as well start with this one in view of the purposes of this conference. *My experience has been that I cannot teach another person how to teach.* To attempt it is for me, in the long run, futile.
- b. *It seems to me that anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential, and has little or no significant influence on behavior.* That sounds so ridiculous I can't help but question it at the same time that I present it.
- c. *I realize increasingly that I am only interested in learnings which significantly influence behavior.* Quite possibly this is simply a personal idiosyncrasy.
- d. *I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.*
- e. *Such self-discovered learning, truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience, cannot be directly communicated to another.* As soon as an individual tries to communicate such experience directly, often with a quite natural enthusiasm, it becomes teaching, and its results are inconsequential. It was some relief recently to discover that Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, had found this too, in his own experience, and stated it very clearly a century ago. It made it seem less absurd.

- f. As a consequence of the above, *I realize that I have lost interest in being a teacher.*
- g. When I try to teach, as I do sometimes, I am appalled by the results, which seem a little more than inconsequential, because sometimes the teaching appears to succeed. When this happens I find that the results are damaging. It seems to cause the individual to distrust his own experience, and to stifle significant learning. *Hence I have come to feel that the outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful.*
- h. When I look back at the results of my past teaching, the real results seem the same — either damage was done, or nothing significant occurred. This is frankly troubling.
- i. As a consequence, *I realize that I am only interested in being a learner, preferably learning things that matter, that have some significant influence on my own behavior.*
- j. *I find it very rewarding to learn, in groups, in relationships with one person as in therapy, or by myself.*
- k. *I find that one of the best, but most difficult ways for me to learn is to drop my own defensiveness, at least temporarily, and to try to understand the way in which his experience seems and feels to the other person.*
- l. *I find that another way of learning for me is to state my own uncertainties, to try to clarify my puzzlements, and thus get closer to the-meaning that my experience actually seems to have.*
- m. This whole train of experiencing, and the meanings that I have thus far discovered in it, seem to have launched me on a process which is both fascinating and at times a little frightening. *It seems to mean letting my experience carry me on, in a direction which appears to be forward, toward goals that I can but dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current meaning of that experience.* The sensation is that of floating with a complex stream of experience, with the fascinating possibility of trying to comprehend its ever changing complexity.

I am almost afraid I may seem to have gotten away from any discussion of learning, as well as teaching. Let me again introduce a practical note by saying that by themselves these interpretations of my own experience may sound queer and aberrant, but not particularly shocking. It is when I realize the *implications* that I shudder a bit at the distance I have come from the commonsense world that everyone knows is right. I can best illustrate that by saying that if the experiences of others had been the same as mine, and if they had discovered similar meanings in it, many consequences would be implied.

- a. Such experience would imply that we would do away with teaching. People would get together if they wished to learn.
- b. We would do away with examinations. They measure only the inconsequential type of learning.
- c. The implication would be that we would do away with grades and credits for the same reason.
- d. We would do away with degrees as a measure of competence partly for the same reason. Another reason is that a degree marks an end or a conclusion of something, and a learner is only interested in the continuing process of learning.
- e. It would imply doing away with the exposition of conclusions, for we would realize that no one learns significantly from conclusions.

I think I had better stop there. I do not want to become too fantastic. I want to know primarily whether anything in my inward thinking as I have tried to describe it, speaks to anything in your experience of the classroom as you have lived it, and if so, what the meanings are that exist for you in *your* experience.

References

1. Barrett-Lennard, G.T. Dimensions of the client's experience of his therapist associated with personality change. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Univ. of Chicago, 1959.
2. Bergman, D. V. Counseling method and client responses. *J. Consult. Psychol.* 1951, 15, 216-224.
3. Butler, J. M., and G. V. Haigh. Changes in the relation between self-concepts and ideal concepts consequent upon client-centered counseling. In C. R. Rogers and Rosalind F. Dymond (Eds.). *Psychotherapy and Personality Change*. University of Chicago Press, 1954, pp. 55-75.
4. Cartwright, Desmond S. Annotated bibliography of research and theory construction in client-centered therapy. *J. of Counsel. Psychol.* 1957, 4, 82-100.
5. Raskin, N. J. An objective study of the locus-of-evaluation factor in psychotherapy. In W. Wolff, and J. A. Precker (Eds.). *Success in Psychotherapy*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1952, Chap. 6.
6. Rogers, C. R. Changes in the maturity of behavior as related to therapy. In C. R. Rogers, and Rosalind F. Dymond (Eds.). *Psychotherapy and Personality Change*. University of Chicago Press, 1954, pp. 215-237.
7. Rogers, C. R. A process conception of psychotherapy. *Amer. Psycho-I.*, 1958,13,142-149.
8. Rogers, C. R. and Dymond, R. F. (Eds.). *Psychotherapy and Personality Change*. University of Chicago Press, 1954, 447 p.
9. Seeman, J., and N. J. Raskin. Research perspectives in client centered therapy. In O. H. Mowrer (Ed.). *Psychotherapy: theory and research*, New York: Ronald, 1953, pp. 205-234.
10. Stephenson, W. *The Study of Behavior*. University of Chicago Press, 1953.
11. Thetford, William N., An objective measurement of frustration tolerance in evaluating psychotherapy. In W. Wolff, and J. A. Precker (Eds.). *Success in Psychotherapy*, New York: Grune & Stratton, 1952, Chapter 2.