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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a review of literature that relates research on Carl Rogers' person-centered learning theory to Web-based learning. Based on the review of the literature, a set of criteria is described that can be used to determine how closely a Web-based course matches the different components of Rogers' person-centered learning theory. Using the criteria based on Rogers' learning theory and the person-centered model of instruction developed by Miller and Mazur (2001), a case example of a Web-centric course is evaluated. The case study evaluation results are discussed in terms of the following criteria: (1) the course provides an emphasis on the learners' interests, personal ability, and prior knowledge of the instructional topic; (2) the facilitative instructor should connect students' knowledge and interests with content principles of the course; (3) the facilitative instructor should select an environment that supports collaborative learning and learner control; (4) the facilitative instructor allows students to develop individually achievable objectives based on their interests and abilities within the context of the course, which could be done in the form of a written contract with the facilitative instructor; (5) the facilitative instructor allows students to develop forms of self-evaluation to demonstrate significant learning based on the individual students' learning objectives; (6) learners work with the facilitative instructor to organize the areas of interest to cover so he or she can meet the needs of the students' learning objectives and maximize the learning potential; (7) the facilitative instructor identifies, selects, and presents to the learners resources to enhance their learning experience; (8) the learners conduct self-evaluation based on their individual learning objectives outlined in their learning contracts; and (9) outcomes of the course should show significant learning. These nine criteria can be used to identify the extent that a Web-based course fits with Rogers' person-centered learning theory. (Contains 25 references.) (Author/AEF)

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The Application of Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Learning Theory to Web-Based Instruction

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of literature that relates research on Carl Rogers' person-centered learning theory to web-based learning. Based on the review of literature, a set of criteria is described that can be used to determine how closely a web-based course matches the different components of Rogers' person-centered learning theory. Using the criteria based on Rogers' learning theory and the person-centered model of instruction developed by Miller and Mazur (2001) a case example of a web-centric course is evaluated.

Relevance of Rogers' Approach to Learning for Web-based Instruction

Education through the years has integrated new technologies to enhance the learning experiences of students. During the twentieth century we have seen the advent of technologies such as projection systems and television expanding educational capabilities beyond the face-to-face classroom setting to teaching at a distance. The 1990s ushered in the World Wide Web (WWW), a technology expanding the capabilities of teaching at a distance possibly as much as television and projection systems expanded education in the twentieth century. While the WWW has expanded the possibilities of education it is also moving educators to consider new ways of teaching and learning because the WWW has literally created a new type of learning environment with possibly as much potential for student learning as a traditional classroom.

Many educators and researchers have begun discussions about the potentials for learning as well as some of the outcomes experienced through web-based instruction. Some of the outcomes discussed are the aspects of active participation shown by students in web-based learning environments (Brown, 1997; Greening, 1998; Oliver & Omari, 1999), the construction of knowledge (Stefanov, Stoyanov, & Nikolov, 1998), problem solving (Corren-Agostinho, Hedberg, & Lefoe, 1998; Oliver & Omari, 1999), students leading the learning (Berge, 1997; Bonk & Cummings, 1998; Stefanov et al., 1998), and teachers acting as facilitators (Brown, 1997; Stefanov et al., 1998). The outcomes mentioned in many articles on web-based learning studies such as Chalmers' (Chalmers, 1997) and Lazlo and Castro's (Laszlo & Castro, 1995) articles can be identified as components of learning as described by Carl Rogers' person-centered learning theory.

Individual Learning in Web-based Environments

Because the WWW is based on hypertext, which is words and images linked by multiple paths (Landow, 1997; McKnight, Dillon, & Richardson, 1996), the learner selects the paths to explore and thus discovers new links of information. It is through the linking of these multiple paths of the hypertext environment in which students become active participants in the construction of knowledge and meaning (Brown, 1997). Another aspect of the Web affecting learning is the ability to enter or leave at any point within the Web. While there are often centralized information centers, a user can often find information from any access point based on their own investigation and experience (Landow, 1997). Student explorations of web-based information will not only help them become active learners but it will also generate attitudes for personal development. These explorations allow learners to pick and choose where they want to go and what they want to learn as well as determine the importance of the information found. The learning possibilities could increase the potential impact on areas such as self-esteem, self-control, self-efficacy and motivation (Laszlo & Castro, 1995).

Collaborative Learning in Web-based Environments

While the WWW can provide opportunities for individual active learning it can also provide opportunities for collaborative learning and the development of learning communities. Using the WWW and the various forms of communication available on it, students can learn through group-based assignments, research projects, and presentations. Collaborative learning on the web can enhance the learning experience for the students more so than individualistic learning on the web because it could create a more communal or team atmosphere. Chickering and Ehrmann (1997) found that working with others increases involvement in learning because good learning is collaborative and social not competitive and isolated. While increasing student involvement, the web also allows the students to assist each other in the exploration of answers to areas of common interest, share constructed knowledge and interpretations of knowledge, and build upon that knowledge through feedback from peers (Graham & Scarborough, 1999; Harasim, 1990).

While collaborative learning can occur just as easily in a face-to-face situation there are some advantages to web-based collaborative learning. Collaborative learning on-line can be done either in a same time/any place situation (synchronous communications) or in an any time/any place situation (asynchronous communications). Using asynchronous communications the learners are allowed to respond at a time most appropriate for them, which can allow for opportunities of reflection. The potential for anonymity of the contributors, can also be a great equalizer when learners will not need to struggle for their chance to speak,

and everyone can make a contribution that will be "heard" by all class members (Brown, 1997). Anonymity can also allow learners to feel that they can be open to expressing their opinions in an open environment allowing better comprehension and affirmation, which are key behaviors at the core of collaborative communication (Zimmer & Alexander, 1996). To ensure development of a learning community the individuals will need to develop and maintain a group environment with all members assuming at least some of the responsibility for the environment starting initially with the facilitator (Armstrong & Yarbrough, 1996).

The Need for a Change in Web-based Learning Environments

While web-based learning environments seem attractive in their potential to widen the scope of users' experiences, these new technologies also have the potential to create artificial and possibly depersonalizing social circumstances through the lack of communication. In the past one of the largest complaints from students in distance education situations is a sense of alienation that leads to dissatisfaction of the learning experience (Biner, Dean, & Mellinger, 1994). In a web-based learning experience it is necessary for the instructor to establish and facilitate continual lines of communication so that students do not feel that they are all alone. Another change that is needed for web-based learning is the locus of control. As in the past, when new interactive technologies are introduced into learning contexts, the role of instruction and the instructor needs to be examined. In web-based learning environment the locus of control shifts from the instructor to the student due to the environment. This change will reflect less control on the part of the instructor as he/she facilitates the learning learners' opportunities for controlling more of their own exploration and interaction. Instruction enhanced and shaped by facilitation may be a key to web-based learning environments because students will need specialized guidance exploring their on-line learning contexts. These needs are all focused upon in the person-centered learning theory developed by Carl Rogers.

Carl Rogers' Person-centered Learning Theory

When Rogers wrote Freedom to Learn (1969; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) he focused on traditional schools but saw the person-centered educational approach developing its strongest roots in alternative schools and universities without walls. While many instructional theories focus on the learners' achievement of specific learning objectives, Rogers' learning theory focused on a goal of helping the learner learn how to learn. Rogers felt the learner would become a freely functioning, self-enhancing, self-actualizing, creative, and dependable person with this focus.

Carl Rogers claimed he developed his person-centered theory because we live in a constantly changing world and as people in this changing world, we need to be willing to change our thinking to adapt to these changes. More importantly, students need to learn how to learn in order to adapt to the different types of learning required in a variety of settings and for a myriad of purposes. Rogers boldly suggested the facilitator should encourage the learners to charge off in new directions dictated by their own interests and to unleash their sense of inquiry and exploration (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

Rogers' model theorizes a person emerging from therapy or from the best of education has experienced optimal psychological growth meaning the learner is able to freely function in all of his or her potentials, self-enhancing, continuing to develop, and always seeking newness in each moment, resulting in a more self-actualized person (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Maslow (1970), describes this self-actualized person as someone who has developed or is developing into the full stature of which he or she is capable. The development of a self-actualized person through the person-centered theory is important in education because one goal of education is to develop learners into whole people. The learners will become people freely functioning in all aspects of love, feeling, and creativity. Of importance, is that these people may continue to learn through life rather than becoming automatons able to recite the information provided to them (Patterson, 1973).

Another aspect of the person-centered learning theory connected to self-actualization is that person-centered learning experiences help the learners become a more creative (Patterson, 1973). As a learner becomes more self-actualized he or she will be able to perceive reality more accurately, accept himself or herself and others, become more spontaneous, independent, and more creative (Davis, 1992; Maslow, 1970). As the learner understands himself or herself more he or she will be able to make meaning of the world as well as become more understanding of varying views and perspectives.

While the development of self-actualized people, who are life-long learners, is a commendable goal how can this goal be achieved? First, a teacher should realize that the only person who can reach the goal of becoming a self-actualized person is the individual learner. Second, unlike in some instructional methods of providing the knowledge to the learners, the teacher in a learner-centered environment becomes a facilitator of the learning the students themselves conduct. It becomes an experience of significant learning because the individual initiates it, allowing the individual to provide personal control and the element of learning is built into the whole experience (Sahakian, 1970).

It is important for the teacher to facilitate the learning and allow the students to be challenged to think for themselves rather than being given information (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). There are several tasks a teacher should do when positioning themselves in a facilitator role instead of a traditional teacher role. The first is to set the mood for the environment. There should be a sense of cooperation and trust within the group. A competitive attitude among members of the learning group will disrupt the sense of trust and cooperation. Next, the teacher as facilitator should make themselves available as one of many resources of information rather than as the main source of information for the students. Most importantly though, the teacher as facilitator should be aware of the attitudes he or she holds. The teacher needs to feel acceptance of his or her own feelings thus becoming a real person in relationship with the students (Rogers, 1961). It is important for the teacher to show realness as a person or in other worlds showing his or her self-actualization because if the goal is to help the students learn how to learn and become more self-actualized, the teacher needs to be self-actualized to foster it in others (Patterson, 1973). The characteristics Patterson describes

was also found when Rogers and Freiberg (1994) talked to students and found that students wanted many of the same tasks required of a facilitator. They discovered that students want to be trusted and respected, wanted freedom, a place where people care, chances to make decisions, teachers as helpers, and teachers who help them succeed (Rogers, 1961).

How Does Rogers' Person-centered Learning Theory Fit with Web-based Learning?

How does Rogers' person-centered learning theory apply to web-based learning as currently many web-based courses could fit well under the problem-based constructivist instructional model? Rogers' theory would work with web-based courses on several levels. The first is Rogers felt his theory of learning was most applicable in non-traditional classes (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Most people would agree web-based courses fit into being non-traditional classes. Many web-courses also meet the needs of a person-centered learning theory because the teacher assumes the position of a facilitator rather than the traditional role of knowledge giver. As the teacher takes on the role of facilitator the students take on the roles of knowledge seekers as they focus on what they want to learn within the class topics. The roles of teacher and students is the key focus of Rogers' person-centered instruction because Rogers believed that the student should be the center of instruction and should conduct the learning thus providing personal control into the experience of learning (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Sahakian, 1970).

The major focus of Rogers' learning theory is that the learning should be student directed and web-based courses provide a fertile ground for student directed learning. The nature of the World Wide Web puts learners in a situation where they will search for information. Through their searches they will experience success and failure, but it is the experience of directing their own individual learning that promotes a growth of self. This growth will allow students the opportunities to learn the process of learning firsthand and allow them to further develop themselves into their fullest potential as human beings.

Criteria for Evaluating Web-based Courses Consistent with Rogers' Approach to Learning

Using Rogers' person-centered learning theory I have developed nine criteria to determine if a web-based course fits with Rogers' approach to learning (See Table 1). These criteria are based on a person-centered instructional design model developed by Miller and Mazur (2001). Using these criteria, an evaluation of a course can be made to determine if it meets the needs stated by Rogers of a person-centered learning experience. The criteria can be used to not only determine if a class is consistent with a person-centered focus but also can help instructors and instructional designers enhance classes to fit closer to Rogers' approach to learning.

Table 1. Person-centered Instructional Approach Criteria for Web-based Courses

Criteria	Criteria Description
1	The course provides an emphasis on the learners' interests, personal ability, and prior knowledge of the instructional topic.
2	The facilitative instructor should connect students' knowledge and interests with content principles of the course.
3	The facilitative instructor should select an environment that supports collaborative learning and learner control.
4	The facilitative instructor allows students to develop individually achievable objectives based on their interests and abilities within the context of the course. This could be done in the form of a written contract with the facilitative instructor.
5	The facilitative instructor allows students to develop individually achievable objectives based on their interests and abilities within the context of the course. This could be done in the form of a written contract with the facilitative instructor.
6	Learners work with the facilitative instructor to organize the areas of interest to cover so he or she can meet the needs of the students' learning objectives and maximize the learning potential.
7	Learners work with the facilitative instructor to organize the areas of interest to cover so he or she can meet the needs of the students' learning objectives and maximize the learning potential.
8	The learners conduct self-evaluation based on their individual learning objectives outlined in their learning contracts. The self-evaluation should show the significance of the learning experience and could also provide focus on levels of personal involvement, self-initiated involvement, and learners' pervasiveness.
9	Outcomes of the course should show significant learning. This could include an accumulation of knowledge on the topic, satisfaction in the learning, desire to master the experience, and a greater understanding of any problems and potential resolutions within the content. The learner should also experience increased levels of self-actualization.

Case Study Example of the Application of the Person-centered Learning Criteria

Description of the Video for Distance Learning and Multimedia Course

The course I selected as an example of the application of applying Rogers' person-centered instructional approach to a web-based course was on video design for distance learning and multimedia that was taught during the Spring 2000 semester. The case example course was a graduate level course offered as an elective in an instructional design program from a southeastern university. The purpose of the course was to discuss a variety of video applications for multimedia development and distance education. The course was framed around concepts and principles of film theory and cinematic narrative research and used

classroom exercises and projects focusing on basic video and video production skills to enhance multimedia and distance education course development.

The course is described as "web-centric" due to a majority of the course materials being available from the course web site however the course does include four "face-to-face" meetings during the semester. The web site provided web-based mini-lectures, relevant web-site links, and a threaded discussion feature for discussions of course readings and collaborative interaction. While the class did meet in a face-to-face setting four times during the semester, students could attend class at the specified site or they could attend via 2-way compressed video hook-up. This attendance option allowed students outside the central Kentucky region to take part in the class without coming to the class meeting site. Based on the web-centric format of this course, I felt this would be an appropriate candidate for evaluation based on a Rogerian approach to learning. The evaluation was conducted by reviewing the course syllabus, course documents, and a brief interview with the course instructor. Each of the nine criterion are presented in italics followed by a statement of meeting or failing to meet the criterion and a brief description of how the course meets or fails to meet the criteria.

Case Study Evaluation Results

Criterion 1: The course provides an emphasis on the learners' interests, personal ability, and prior knowledge of the instructional topic.

The course met criterion 1. The course needs to accommodate a wide range of skill-levels and abilities students bring to the course. The instructor developed three areas or constellations, as called in the course, based on conceptual, technical, and application skills to meet these needs. Each constellation listed topics students could select and focus their personalized instruction upon during the course. An example of this selected focus was the technical constellation, which required students to choose 5 out of 12 technical areas they wanted to master within the course.

Criterion 2: The facilitative instructor should connect students' knowledge and interests with content principles of the course.

The course met criterion 2. The application constellation of the course required students to select 2 out of 6 topic areas with one of the topics required of all students connecting the technical areas students focused on mastering within the course.

Criterion 3: The facilitative instructor should select an environment that supports collaborative learning and learner control.

The course met criterion 3. Because the class only met face-to-face four times during the semester the teacher used a threaded discussion list on the Nicenet web site (http://www.nicenet.org). This site allowed the instructor to create discussion topics, post questions, and moderate online discussions with the students. Using the Nicenet threaded discussion list, the students were able to post messages to other students and the teacher either publicly or privately.

Criterion 4: The facilitative instructor allows students to develop individually achievable objectives based on their interests and abilities within the context of the course. This could be done in the form of a written contract with the facilitative instructor.

The course met criterion 4. The course met this criterion by allowing students to set their objectives by selecting topic areas that would help them at their present skill level or help them to advance to a higher skill level using the technologies available to them.

Criterion 5: The facilitative instructor allows students to develop forms of self-evaluation to demonstrate significant learning based on the individual students' learning objectives.

The course did not meet criterion 5. While the course had been designed to allow students to develop individually achievable objectives there were no opportunities within the course that allowed students to develop personalized forms of self-evaluation to demonstrate significant learning. The instructor set the evaluation methods used within this course.

Criterion 6: Learners work with the facilitative instructor to organize the areas of interest to cover so she can meet the needs of the students' learning objectives and maximize the learning potential.

Based on the evaluation using only publicly available course information and a brief interview with the instructor the course cannot be evaluated on criteria 6. To answer this question it would be necessary to conduct observations of the interactions that occur in the learning environment.

Criterion 7: The facilitative instructor identifies, selects, and presents to the learners resources to enhance their learning experience.

The course met criterion 7. The instructor provided a links page off of the course homepage listing several web sites providing additional learning resources for the students. The instructor also provided a course video with instructional clips as well as several mini web lectures students could access to help with their understanding of the required course text.

Criterion 8: The learners conduct self-evaluation based on their individual learning objectives outlined in their learning contracts.

The course did not meet criterion 8. There was no information provided about learners conducting self-evaluations. Based on the available information the instructor evaluated students based on class participation, technical and application constellation exercises, and the final project.

Criterion 9: Outcomes of the course should show significant learning.

The course met criterion 9. The course had been offered for three semesters with the constellation first being introduced in the second semester offered. Students rated the course during the initial semester at 3.6 of a possible score of 5.0. The second semester using the constellation approach has reached a 4.2 out of a total of 5.0. The instructor also found a high quality of work in the video products presented by the students. The students of the second semester also suggested additional constellation activities that have been incorporated into the course. The suggested activities showed that students were interested in further accumulation of knowledge on the topics and wanted to suggest the learning opportunities to help future students.

Summary of the Course Evaluation

Overall this course promotes a Rogerian approach based on the criteria developed for evaluation. Based on information available for the evaluation, the main area of concern for this course using a person-centered instructional mode was the lack of student-developed forms of self-evaluation and a major focus on teacher evaluation of student progress. To allow students to feel they are developing their own learning objectives it would be recommended to also allow students to develop individualized evaluations of their performance. Although the course does not meet all of the criteria, there has been an obvious change in the satisfaction of the course based on the increase of course ratings since the constellation approach was used. The increased course ratings met one of the components of significant learning, which can promote increased interests in the topics and increased levels of self-actualization within the students. Based on the results of this case evaluation, specifically the outcomes that were reported from the instructor it can be inferred that providing the course with a Rogerian person-centered focus increased the potential for positive outcomes.

Conclusions

Several conclusions have been made from the application of the Rogerian person-centered criteria to a web-based course. The nine criteria posited in this paper can be used to identify the extent that a web-based course fits with Rogers' person-centered learning theory. Using the person-centered learning criteria can be used to help adapt the instruction of the course to fit a full model of person-centered instruction such as Miller and Mazur's person-centered model of instruction (2001). It is necessary to conduct additional research into the impact of person-centered instruction such as Miller and Mazur's model (2001) on web-based courses. It will also be necessary to begin studying what types of instructional models work best in web-based instructional learning environments.

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