

# PERSON-CENTERED PEDAGOGY IN AN ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: ELEMENTS OF A PERSON-CENTERED INSTRUCTOR

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## ABSTRACT

*There are several academic resources to help an instructor navigate the asynchronous online classroom. Teaching in the current collegiate environment presents some different strategic and pedagogical considerations, among them student engagement within the classroom. Student engagement seems to be the golden key to unlocking the door of success in the online environment. How do we get the unmotivated student involved? What do we have to do to reach the student struggling to understand the content of the course? Why do some students grasp the concepts we are teaching easier than others? While there are several researchers that have given credence to student engagement and the challenges represented in these questions, this article will focus on the importance of person-centered pedagogical considerations with respect to student engagement, grading, and instructor involvement to enhance the learning environment of the online classroom. Knowing the difference between student-centered and person-centered pedagogy is key to increasing student online participation and engagement.*

*Keywords: person-centered pedagogy, student-centered pedagogy, student engagement*

## INTRODUCTION

Person-centered skills are most often associated with the profession of counseling rather than education (Corey, 2013). However, there is great benefit in applying key counseling techniques to the field of education. While the application of person-centered techniques appears different within a counseling session, the foundational concepts remain the same. This article seeks to better understand the application of person-centered techniques in an asynchronous online learning environment and their impact on student engagement, instructor involvement, and grading.

## PERSON-CENTERED THEORY

Person-centered theory, also known as Rogerian therapy and phenomenological therapy (Wilson, 2019), was introduced by Carl Rogers in the field of counseling in 1951 (Rogers, 1951). At the time of his revolutionary ideas within counseling, Freud and Adler had very different notions of how

problems developed in an individual's life and how to solve those problems. Rogers was one of the first theorists to decrease the emphasis of pathology in counseling and increase the understanding of individual strengths and resources as an avenue of productive change (Corey, 2013). His core belief centered around the actualizing tendency, which is the ability of individuals to strive for self-actualization (Wilson, 2019). Rogers identified the importance of three foundational concepts for use in person-centered therapy to produce a positive client outcome (Corey, 2013). These include unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy (Corey, 2013; Rogers, 1951; Wilson, 2019). Adherence to the qualities of unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy enhances the learning potential for students in an online asynchronous classroom.

### *Unconditional Positive Regard*

Unconditional positive regard (UPR) can be a

difficult concept to understand. Rogers referred to this concept as one of equality, a nonjudgmental attitude, and an acceptance of each individual (Amadi, 2013). This espouses the Christian worldview of the sinful nature in each of us; in other words, we are no different from one another. Amadi (2013) identified the quandary for the counselor in the application of UPR due to the value laden premise of identifying a diagnosis for an individual seeking treatment. Identifying a diagnosis involves judgment akin to an instructor grading a student assignment. How can we use UPR in the classroom with the dilemma of grading?

### *Empathy*

Empathy involves more than understanding an individual and should not be confused with sympathy. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, sympathy can be described as “feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortunes.” However, Rogers (1951) described empathy as to perceive as sensitively and accurately as possible all of the perceptual field as it is being experienced by the client, with the same figure-ground relationships, to the full degree that the client is willing to communicate that perceptual field; and having thus perceived this internal frame of reference of the other as completely as possible, to indicate to the client the extent to which he is seeing through the client’s eyes (p. 34).

With these definitions in mind, sympathy involves the feeling of solace, while empathy involves a mutual understanding or agreement with another individual. How can empathy be

applied in an educational atmosphere without crossing an ethical boundary respective of relationships with students?

### *Congruence*

Corey (2013) describes congruence as therapist genuineness. Communication between therapist and client demonstrates an authenticity that cannot be incongruent with the reality of the therapist toward the client. In other words, if a therapist dislikes a quality of the client yet acts differently, the sessions will be considered impaired. “Congruence, in terms of our relationships to others, underlines the fact that our individuality (or identity), our integrity, and our sense of wholeness are dialogical in character: born, sustained, and changed in dialogue with others” (Frankel et al., 2019, p. 28). Therefore, congruence, authenticity, and genuineness align within the person-centered theory.

## **STUDENT-CENTERED UNDERSTANDINGS**

Student-centered pedagogy demonstrates some similarities with respect to person-centered theory, but the biggest difference lies in the focus of each paradigm. Jaiswal (2019) stated,

Student centered learning is a pedagogical approach that takes the learning pace of students, the differences in their learning styles, their interests, skills and needs into consideration. Also, the experiences of students, the learning outcomes, active learning tasks, the content and framework for presenting academic material in conducive learning environment is given significance in the student-centered learning environments (p. 1074).

The primary foci are to develop a sense of

Table 1. Differences of Student-Centered and Person-Centered Approaches

<b>Focus</b>	<b>Student-Centered Approach</b>	<b>Person-Centered Approach</b>
Foundational Concepts	Pedagogy	Counseling
Goals	Learning self-efficacy	Self-actualization
Primary Concepts	Instructional support Assessment of individual abilities Learning of student	Unconditional positive regard Empathy Congruence
Focus	Student	Person/Individual
Primary Question	Do you understand?	Who are you?
Potential Outcome	Understanding Course Material	Self-Actualizing Tendency
Teaching Approach	Mediating	Thoughtful
Relationship to Content	Expert of the material	Understanding student through the material
Grades	Reflection of understanding content	Used as a motivational tool

independence, critical thinking skills, and enhanced learning opportunities. Gentle guidance is used to direct each student in a self-evaluation process (Jaiswal, 2019). Benlahcene et al. (2020) stated that “the student-centered learning approach is based on the idea that the learners are at the center of the learning process and the teachers are facilitators of this process instead of being dominant agents in the classroom” (p. 204). They went on to identify student-centered facilitation as a “mediating” approach. Table 1 clarifies the differences between these approaches.

### **APPLICATION OF PERSON-CENTERED TECHNIQUES PEDAGOGICALLY**

There are several educational resources that help teachers improve pedagogical applications (Forrest, 2020; Sharoff, 2019; Wang, 2020; Yang et al., 2020). Most of these resources focus on how to improve content understanding versus creating an atmosphere conducive to enhancing academic progress. Regardless of the content, when a person-centered approach is utilized, the person rather than the student becomes the focus in the classroom. Understanding the student is pivotal to success in the classroom and engagement becomes the avenue to this success (Sharoff, 2019). Therefore, the application of person-centered techniques in an online environment involves engagement, and it becomes the outcome of appropriately used person-centered techniques.

#### *Unconditional Positive Regard*

As stated previously, unconditional positive regard involves equality, a nonjudgmental attitude, and an acceptance of each individual (Amadi, 2013). Teaching espouses a nonjudgmental attitude and acceptance toward every student, but it is an unfortunate truth that education is not created equal, teaching is not created equal, and student understanding is not created equal. Due to the overwhelming disparity in teaching styles within the private and public sector (Smajic et al., 2014), between urban and rural settings (Kissi et al., 2018), and between ethnicities (American Psychological Association, 2012; Kuglemass & Ready, 2011; Stevens et al., 2018), treating students similarly in the classroom and expecting them to learn and understand at the same rate seems to be an unrealistic expectation. These disparities are enhanced in an online environment and require an

intimate understanding of each student.

Using a nonjudgmental attitude and acceptance involves understanding disparity and how to address these sensitive issues with students. Using specific person-centered skills and paying attention to student written work, engagement in the learning process becomes possible. Using engagement strategies with person-centered skills decreases the degree of disparity within the classroom (Mead et al., 2020).

The process requires an understanding of each student and begins with their first writing in the classroom, usually an introduction of who they are. Special attention is focused on their interests, family, and personal lives with a thoughtful response by the instructor alluding to these personal issues. The students are each invited to share their personal experiences as they relate to the discussion questions throughout the course. As the students share their personal experiences, thank each student for sharing their personal experiences with the class.

Encouraging and praising student efforts is an important consideration (Grady, 2018). Identifying the student’s strengths and providing positive feedback that caters to their strengths helps to build engagement for students in the course room. Connecting students to each other and the course material in a personal way helps them to view the material in a different manner.

Assessing the initial writings of each student in relation to grammar, sentence structure, APA format, word choice, and syntax may indicate the need to refer them to resources in the student success center. Critical thinking as an aspect of learning punctuates the academic discrepancy of learners (Allen et al., 2021). When providing feedback for students, it is important to identify no more than one or two improvements per student and ask if they are interested in learning more about them. Helping students to find these resources throughout the course is a significant aspect of their learning, which can include the use of Loom videos or links or contacting by phone.

#### *Empathy*

As stated above, empathy involves a mutual understanding or agreement with another individual. To obtain a mutual understanding or agreement, engagement in the asynchronous online

classroom is needed. To connect with a student requires more than the written word; it involves a deeper understanding of an individual, one that requires meaning and emotional dialogue. For connection to occur, the instructor must consider all avenues of reaching a student. Connecting with a student can be done in the online classroom in several ways or by phone or video (Chen et al., 2012).

Connecting with students requires an understanding of disparity viewed through the lens of empathy (Swan et al., 2020). Considering their race, ethnicity, age, location, gender, disability status, language, culture, and world view, to name a few, is vital when connecting with a student. Empathizing with an individual must be thoroughly considered prior to academic prowess.

Consider the plight of two students. Student A comes from a modest family located in inner city Chicago, and student B is from a wealthy family located in a suburb of Philadelphia. Student A is a 36-year-old male and attended a public school, while student B is a 19-year-old female and attended a private school. Student A is African American and student B is White. Both decided to attend online college in an asynchronous environment. The written work of student B is considered exemplary, while the written work of student A would be considered subpar. Student B received a scholarship from the university for academic excellence. Student A works full time to support his wife and children while attending college.

Student A contacts the instructor through the private forum requesting more time to complete an assignment due to unforeseen circumstances. The instructor notices that student A often completes discussion posts and peer responses in a haphazard manner and is the last to post. Student B is often the first to post to the discussion questions, responds to peers offering insightful feedback, and includes a question to their peers to extend the discussion. What should this instructor do?

It is important to point out that instructors are busy people, especially full-time, online instructors (Makarenko, 2020). They spend hours every day reading through a large amount of student posts in four to eight courses in addition to grading student assignments and vetting questions in the private forum and the question to instructor forum.

It is understandable that these instructors would follow a strict regimen of grading each student in every class in a similar manner, without regard to personal circumstances.

When faced with this dilemma, it is understandable, and possibly, student-centered to treat every student equally, but treating students equally, without regard for their key individual differences, limits the positive experience some students, such as Student A, could have in an online Christian environment. While a student-centered instructor may focus on the importance of responsibility in the timely submission of course materials, the person-centered instructor would view Student A through a lens of disparity and consider reaching out to them to better understand their circumstances (Swan et al., 2020). Understanding the circumstances of each student may seem overwhelming for an online instructor carrying four to eight classes every 8 weeks, but it is important to remember that this may only occur in a small percentage of students in each classroom.

### *Congruence*

Congruence focuses on the authenticity and genuineness of an individual. As an instructor, it is important to maintain honesty with students and ourselves. We all have reactions to student behaviors, and reacting to student behaviors with an understanding of their life situation contributes to the care of student welfare. This involves knowing a student beyond the academic setting. Understanding the circumstances of a student that brought them to behave negatively or positively in the classroom requires careful reflection on emotional assumptions.

Rogers et al. (2013) punctuated the importance of acknowledging our humanness in the classroom as Rogers questioned, “Who wants a perfect teacher?” (p. 9). Being human in the classroom includes acknowledging our mistakes, apologizing to students when we are wrong, and attempting to improve our fallacies. Being human acknowledges our personal voice versus our instructor voice. Our personal voice may state, “Wow—you rocked that assignment! Way to go!” Our instructor voice may state, “You did well in meeting the criteria for the assignment.”

### **GRADING USING PERSON-CENTERED TECHNIQUES**

What is the meaning of grades? Are they more

than just the first few letters of the alphabet, sans E? Or are they meant to convey meaning for the online student? Can grades be used effectively in person-centered teaching? Or are they merely a byproduct of quizzes and assignments? These are important questions to consider when using person-centered teaching.

The grade, for students, is the primary goal for completing a course and is the result of understanding and mastering course material. As an online instructor, more student contact reflects the desire for an improved grade than any other type of contact in the course room. This includes help with understanding course assignments, discussion questions, and attempts to improve participation grades.

It is important to ask if grades are flexible (labile) or inflexible (static). There is a degree of inflexibility in grading when students are asked to complete quizzes and tests with defined answers. This is understandable. However, in an online environment, writing responses to discussion questions, peers, instructors, and assignments is the norm. For this type of environment, flexible grading may help the student to improve their work and gain a better understanding of the course materials.

Flexible grading allows a student to resubmit written work, taking into consideration the feedback of the instructor (Elkins, 2016). This allows the student to improve their grade without considering reducing the grade based on timing. The timing of assignment completion becomes secondary to the problems a student is experiencing in the course room or in their lives.

When flexible grading is used, the ability to connect with the student improves and engagement

gives the instructor the ability to know the student on an emotional level (Elkins, 2016). Understanding the struggles of the student with respect to disparity is a key consideration in grading (Paulsen & McCormack, 2020). This also allows the instructor an ability to verbally discuss content within the course room in a way that is understandable to the student. Grades become the catalyst for meaningful communication with students, though it is not the grade that is the focal point for the instructor. It is the connection with the student.

### TEACHER PRESENCE IN AN ONLINE ASYNCHRONOUS ENVIRONMENT

The university expectation for online presence is a minimum of 4 days per week, responding to private forum and questions for the instructor forum within 24 hours, and making sure that you are not absent from the course room for over 48 hours. While these guidelines are important, are they enough when using a person-centered pedagogy?

Person-centered teaching requires dedication, time, and energy. It requires careful organization for each class and involves careful consideration of frontloading the classroom (Roscoe & Orr, 2010). The key to saving time and energy in an online asynchronous environment involves preparing the classroom with person-centered approaches using frontloading strategies. Building a 7- to 8-week online course entails thoughtful attention to student mindset from week to week.

Using person-centered strategies presents several options for the personal engagement of students and lively conversation around several interesting activities. Table 2 identifies potential weekly structures regarding the frontloading techniques. In addition to the two discussion

Table 2. Weekly Frontloading Posting Options—One Online Course Example

Week	Biblical Inquiry	Person-Centered Technique	Enhancing Didactic Content	Weekly Summary Considerations
1	Jeremiah 29:11—Plans	Languages	YouTube video	Focus on specific elements of the course for each student
2	Romans 5: 3–4—Personal Struggles	Pictures	Created a Loom video	Content + pictures
3	Galatians 5:22—Fruit	Meyers Briggs Inventory	APA support	Content + assignment
4	Matthew 28:20—With you . . .	Family	Brief PPT presentation	Content + Best Friend
5	Hebrews 13:5—Never leave . . .	Best Friend	Library connections	Content + Biblical Verse
6	Romans 8:26–27—The Holy Spirit	Favorite Food	APA support	Content + Happy Place
7	Post your favorite verse	Your Happy Place	Putting it all together	Content + Favorite Bible Verse

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questions, the following options become available as optional opportunities for participation credit.

Each of these weekly optional opportunities for participation credit are created as templates for the online classroom and frontloaded for each week either in the discussion forum or in the announcements. For enhanced student engagement the templates work best in discussion forums allowing students to respond within a forum rather than in the announcements. Once students understand their ability to obtain participation credit, their willingness to engage in person-centered strategies increases. As students get to know each other better through the person-centered activities, they begin to increase involvement in the online discussion posts based on personal knowledge of everyone in the classroom. Their level of engagement is transformed from student-instructor interactions to student-student interactions.

## **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this article the dynamics of person-centered instruction were explained in relation to student engagement, instructor involvement, and grading. An understanding of unconditional positive regard, congruence, and empathy as it relates to pedagogical application was presented. A comparative analysis with respect to student-centered teaching and person-centered instruction provided a glimpse of understanding the key differences between these academic approaches. The culmination of utilizing person-centered pedagogy throughout a course is evidenced by the degree of online participation and engagement among students in the course.

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## Appendix A

## Examples of Weekly Biblical Inquiries in the Online Classroom

Week	Biblical Passage	Weekly Message
1	Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you" says the Lord. "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (New King James Version).	<p>This is such a powerful verse. As I reflect on my life, there is not a moment that the Lord has not been in charge. He helped me to settle on an undergraduate degree in the field of addiction counseling in 1987. He led me to many opportunities in my career. He put on my heart to pursue not only my master's but also my PhD. But I remember my "soul" goal in 1987 when I started my tenure in addiction counseling. I wanted to work for 20 years and then pursue a teaching position. I am now in my 34th year of practice and continue to love this field. There have been good time and struggles along the way but never have I doubted that God continues to give me a "hope and a future."</p> <p>As you go through this course and have an opportunity to apply what you are learning, what plans do you believe that the Lord has for you?</p> <p>Warmly, Dr J</p>
2	Romans 5: 3-4: Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.	<p>I love what God chooses to do with struggles.</p> <p>This discussion question asks us to describe what drug seeking behavior is and how this affects the brain reward pathway? Drug seeking behavior is commonplace in the world of addiction. To watch individuals struggle with the craving response of the brain is very painful. I know in their heart they don't want to be addicted and yet, cannot stop their behavior due to the strength of the pathway in the brain. Knowing this, how would you use this biblical verse to help someone experiencing addiction?</p> <p>Warmly, Dr. J,</p>
3	Galatians 5:22—The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.	<p>I love this bible verse!! I learned this through song, and it is one of the ways that I remember it!</p> <p>This post focuses on outpatient treatment programs. As a counselor my motto when working with clients that have an addiction is to love them until they are ready to love themselves. That is my "soul" focus in therapy. This bible verse helps me to maintain the spirit of joy with each new client; the spirit of peace when faced head on with the process of addiction; the spirit of patience should someone relapse; the spirit of kindness when a client expresses frustration; the spirit of goodness when faced with the deceitfulness of addiction; the spirit of faithfulness that God is in control; the spirit of gentleness with working with family members, and the spirit of self-control when faced with countertransference reactions.</p> <p>How would you use this biblical verse when working with clients?</p> <p>Warmly, Dr. J</p>
4	Matthew 28:20—Lo, I am always with you, even to the end of the age." Amen.	<p>This discussion question asks us why we believe that the drug is so addicting. It is hard to believe that God is always with us—but it is true. He is there when the person is ingesting drugs, with the drug dealer, and with us in the group room. He does not want any of us to fall astray and works His hardest to bring all of his followers back to Him. I pray that every client is able to see His eyes, hear His voice, and feels His touch when I am counseling that I can spread His message and others can know that "Lo, I am always with you ..." AMEN.</p> <p>How would you spread this message to clients that you would be working with?</p> <p>Warmly, Dr. J</p>

## Appendix B

### Examples of Person-Centered Inquiries in the Online Classroom

Week	Focus	Posting Example
1	Languages	<p>Each week I like to post something that helps us get to know each other better. For this first week I have chosen languages.</p> <p>My husband and I enjoy learning about different cultures and are heavily involved in the Kurdish community. We have also enjoyed hosting foreign exchange students while they attend school in the US. It has fascinated me how they were able to communicate while here in the US, some of them having minimal understanding of the English language. However, by the time that they left, they had mastered this very difficult language.</p> <p>To earn participation credit, please respond to this post (100 word minimum) letting us know your native language and how you have come to learn the English language. I look forward to learning more about each of you.</p> <p>Warmly, Dr. J</p>
2	Pictures	<p>Please feel free to post one or two of your favorite pictures and explain if you would want to. I look forward to learning more about each of you through this experience.</p> <p>To start us off, I have chosen to post three pictures of people that are important in my life. There is one of me and my husband celebrating our birthdays as we were born 1 week apart, one of me and my sister at a Steam thresher's reunion, and one of me and my youngest daughter. Each of these individuals has shaped my life into what it is now. My sister has been gone for 7 years now and was unable to see me complete my PhD. My husband is truly my soulmate and the best thing that has ever happened in my life. My daughter is one of the most kindred spirits I have been privileged to know.</p> <p>I look forward to seeing and "hearing" the stories that come about with your pictures.</p>
3	MBTI	<p>Who doesn't want to learn more about themselves? Especially when going into the field of counseling!!</p> <p>The Meyers Briggs Type Inventory identifies personality types based on a person's preferences in 4 categories: 1) Introversion vs Extroversion, 2) Sensing or Intuitive, 3) Thinking or Feeling, and 4) Judging or Perceiving. Based on the assessment, an individual is given 4 Letters to correspond to the categories. Once a person can determine the 4 representative letters, their personality type is revealed. Please feel free to use the resources below to determine your personality type. Then share the results with the class and your perception of the accuracy of this inventory.</p> <p>To start us off, I am an INFP/J which is identified primarily as a counselor—I hope this is accurate after 34 years as a counselor!</p>
4	Family	<p>The influence of family in our lives cannot be overstated. It is shaped from infancy and morphs into adulthood as we define and redefine what and who we consider as our family today.</p> <p>With this in mind, and to your comfort level, who would you consider your family. For instance, my parents married at 18 and had children right away. I am the middle child of 3 with an older sister of 15 months and a younger brother by 2.5 years. My sister died 7 years ago (I miss her dearly) and I have a very close relationship with my brother. I would characterize my childhood as happy, yet chaotic as we moved every two years—I am an Air Force brat. My mom was an only child and my father was the middle of 3 so we have 5 first cousins that we had limited time with due to moving. We keep in touch with all of them through Facebook and love to joke and share pictures with each other.</p> <p>My coparent and I raise 2 beautiful daughters. My oldest daughter lives close to both of us and my youngest is studying to be an optometrist with 2 more years to go. Like most children, they are amazing, and I love them to the moon and back.</p> <p>I met my soulmate on 7/7/07 and we married shortly thereafter and currently reside on a 34-acre hobby farm with 2 dogs and a cat. I have gotten closer to his family and enjoy time with both families with the added bonus of inviting my co-parent to enjoy holidays with us.</p>

## Appendix C

### *Examples of Weekly Summary in an Online Environment*

Good Morning Class,

We had a great week of discussions and discovery as we all got to know each other this week. I appreciate your involvement in our discussions regarding your perspectives on drug use and the drug each of you would like to learn more about. Through our weekly biblical inquiry we were able to identify the plans we believe God has for us. We also understood culture through the use of languages for everyone in the class. It has been great getting to know each other better throughout our first week together. I look forward to learning more about each of you as we delve into our week 2 discussions.

Drugs being studied throughout this course:

Drug	Students*
Adderall	1 Student
Cannabis/Marijuana	5 Students
Fentanyl	1 Student
Methamphetamine	2 Students
Amphetamine	1 Student
Alcohol	1 Student
Xanax	2 Students
Oxycodone	2 Students

\*Student first names are used to identify which students will be studying each drug throughout the course.

Good Morning Class,

I thoroughly enjoyed our discussion this past week as we reviewed celebrities that died of drug overdoses and the impact they had on our lives, as well as describing what drug seeking behavior is and how this affects the brain reward pathway. We enjoyed a lively discussion about Romans 5:3–4 and how we could incorporate this verse while counseling others struggling with addiction. I truly enjoyed the pictures that everyone shared that included family members, beautiful scenery, best friends, and cuddly/furry study mates. My favorite pictures included the following:

Student Name*	Description of Picture
Student 1	Your entire family, you look so happy
Student 2	You and your grandchildren—what a blessing
Student 3	The cow and the look on the cow's face
Student 4	You and your sons and the look on your youngest son's face

\*Student first names are used to identify each student.