

## Carl Rogers on Laboratory Learning

John L. Hoff

I'm quite sure you have been introduced to Carl Rogers prior to this. He published his first book as a psychologist in 1939, which was just four years after I was born. I knew him off and on for three years in the mid 60s when he was a favorite conference keynoter. I came to know him and his wife in informal settings and small training workshops for graduate students. By the time I met him, I had read several of his books and many of his articles. I was becoming a humanist and a spokesperson for the emerging philosophy that the purpose of each life was to become fully alive. This was at the same time as I was exploring the Asian enlightenment tradition, which quite similarly encouraged open-mindedness and positive attitude. Whether you read Carl Rogers previously or are paying attention to him for the first time, Colette and I are including a pertinent article by him on "The Interpersonal Relationship and the Facilitation of Learning." He begins this article with a quote from Albert Einstein:

*... It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail.*

Carl Rogers is one of many scholars from that era who stressed **the importance of free environments in which learning could happen**. These were environments in which people were encouraged to think for themselves and to think about how to utilize fully the opportunities they were having—and then to examine their thoughts, feelings, and behavior with an intention to learn how to further improve their lives. A week in a human relations laboratory is filled with provocations to notice what you're interested in and how you learn. It was Carl Rogers who said, "The only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn." Leadership in an HRL must not only encourage people to have a good time, that same leadership must require us to look at the meaning and consequences of what we do and to be caring about a whole variety of responses to anything that happens.

### Start by Accepting Yourself

Carl Rogers wrote a book, *On Becoming a Person*, and taught that there was an initial transformation for human development—**self-acceptance**. He said, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself, just as I am, then I can change." This change starts with seeing yourself as you really are, facing the facts, feeling the consequences, and knowing the impact on others. This confrontation with our own nature, like a frank look in the mirror, is mostly **to notice how you see yourself**. Carl Rogers went on to acknowledge that such encounters with truth about ourselves in relationship is usually when we are being criticized and found wrong. And Rogers encouraged therapists, trainers, teachers, and friends, to think about their impact on others and choose to reflect back to them a good picture of

themselves. **This approach to counseling does not correct what is wrong without first affirming what is working.** Rogers taught empathy in a client-centered approach that helped people learn how to encourage change rather than just discouraging mistakes. It's true that in a very rational and secular environment he taught therapists and teachers how to feel empathy, compassion, and to be in service of the client's welfare. He told lots of stories about discouraged and desperate people who were transformed when a therapist, teacher, or friend accepted them as they were and loved them consistently through a period of recovery. **He pointed out that self-acceptance often happens because someone else has accepted you first.** Perhaps you are aware of someone who was transformational in your life by accepting you, all of you, and is remembered by you as transformative. I ask **you** if you are willing to help others by simply accepting them as they are. That is what is **most** helpful to them. This is called unconditional love. Sometimes it is only about "counting to ten" or changing the subject, yet it is all about refusing to be judgmental until you can be more fully empathic.

### **Offer A Relationship and Encourage Freedom**

Carl Rogers wrote, "In my early professional years, I was asking the question: how can I treat, or cure, or change this person? Now, I would phrase the question in this way: **how can I provide a relationship which this person may use for his or her own personal growth?**" I knew him well enough to know that he did this by offering freedom, the freedom to be oneself, the freedom to even make a mistake or say something stupid without being judged. This radical acceptance was something that he modeled and verbally encouraged with such comments as, "Be true to yourself. Get what you need out of this experience." He would add, "We are each learning something different and something which we uniquely need to learn."

I think that, as a staff for a human relations laboratory, you are offering each and all together **a relationship**, which each person may use for personal growth. Within relationship each lab participant is invited to live more fully into their own story, and experience more fully their own potential, and "come home" to self-acceptance because they are verbally and visibly appreciated. This will require that groups continuously reflect back to people their choice to learn, their accomplishments so far, and their own apparent desire to be a good person. Psychological and social problems are merely impediments that shape learning and growth. Trying on new behaviors is not easy for any of us, however the Lab is constructed to make change easier and less risky.

### **Learn How to Learn and Learn How to Change**

Carl Rogers writes the following message in many different ways: "The only person who is educated is the one who has learned to learn and change." Rogers saw that becoming a civil, sensitive, and rational human being requires a process of awakening oneself to the possibilities of learning in each new experience you move

into. As with others with a humanistic perspective, Carl Rogers saw that each of us organizes our lives into discrete experiences that only later are seen to be connected. To apply this to your life is to see how you organize your day into manageable experiences that generally have a beginning, middle, and end. Our unconscious minds (habit?) organize our day into short flows of behavior that have a goal to them, such as getting to work or having lunch or meeting with a friend or doing errands, and each of these experiences contains moments of stress and a sense of accomplishment. Positive people pay more attention to what works than what doesn't work, and they learn more too; and their experiences add to their energy and ability rather than deplete it. To change yourself begin with acknowledging and accepting whatever is true. It is clear that the attempt to change behavior must follow acceptance of what is. Rogers pointed out that it is important to face into our fears and do things that we have been avoiding, **only** after having accepted what exists and understanding the history of that behavior. When you do not accept your behavior as something you have learned, something that was taught to you or something that you arrived at when you were younger and in a different situation, you are not yet inwardly empowered to change your behavior. To accept what you have learned and how you were taught is the beginning of learning how to learn and then learning new behaviors.

### **To Embrace A Process by Choosing A Direction**

A human relations laboratory is a process for learning:

1. About oneself as a person;
2. About joining others and acknowledging relationship;
3. About collaborative living.

You are a unique person somewhere in the developmental process of fulfilling your potential. Acknowledging your uniqueness is central. You are the only person who can know your inwardness and your intention. In paying attention to what you are doing and what you are trying to accomplish, you will find yourself learning how to improve your ability and get better results. Your satisfaction comes from having learned how to learn about living and accomplishing developmental tasks from tying your own shoelaces to helping a child learn how to do that.

**As an adult the best place to start is by consciously offering relationship to others.** This will involve identifying what you have to share with others and what it is they need from you. It will involve thinking of others **first** because you have already learned to claim your own needs and interests. It is a goal to become a mature person who can offer a relationship to others in which they can feel free to share themselves with you and to change as they need to. A book by Margaret and Jordan Paul is entitled *Do I Have to Give Up Me to Be Loved by You?* The answer to that question is this: after you have accepted yourself as you are and love yourself for what you can be, you will find yourself ready to offer unconditional love to others. We tend to relate to others as a child to an adult until we have appreciated

our own courageous inner child still striving to be a responsible adult. To relate maturely is to see each person in a process of growing up and “coming out” as a loving being.

Carl Rogers wrote, “The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction but not a destination.” A human relations laboratory demonstrates a process of having a good life: what it is and what it takes to maintain it. And what it means to bring others into what we know is a good life. In the biographical materials about Carl Rogers that Colette and I are sending you, there is mentioned his nineteen propositions that he based his life’s work upon. Please download them and keep them where you can often reflect on them. They will work you over. I will add to these propositions of Carl Rogers a similar list of characteristics of relationally-oriented laboratory learning:

1. All of us at the laboratory are entering **into a cooperative experience which will impact us inwardly** and change the way we each see our own world.
2. **Each of us—staff and registrants—will have our own unique experience**, which is our personal reality, constructed from our own history and experience.
3. Since we each respond uniquely to the laboratory, **we are each learning about different matters**. We are each being “true” to our own needs and goals and our sense of our own weaknesses and strengths.
4. In the laboratory, after a period of time, each of us will initiate relationships, take on roles, and present ourselves as we each believe is appropriate. **As we relax, we reveal ourselves more freely**.
5. In a highly interactive environment such as the HRL, **there is a growing consciousness of relationship**. Attention is given to the **congruity** of each person; that is, how well a person integrates the variety of ways she expresses herself. We also pay attention to relationships among people and **patterns of subgroups** emerge. And since there are so many things going on inside of us and many **interactions** happening within the group, **there is a growing awareness of people who are relationally sensitive or not**.
6. As the laboratory progresses, we become aware of the basic tendency humans have to maintain the status quo, to remain balanced and true to prior commitments as a balance to radical or disruptive change. **In the laboratory we usually observe almost a full day of resistance where individuals are rebalancing in the presence of the freedom to change**.

7. **A relationship laboratory cannot exist without a deep respect for the individual, for the internal frame of reference by which that individual makes decisions.**
8. In approximately the third day of a laboratory such as ours, each individual, group, and the laboratory community as a whole begins to take on a purpose and goals that have been identified (by individuals for themselves, by groups, at the invitation of lab leadership). The organismic nature of groups and community follows the energy of individuals who are allowing the process to work. **At all levels of the laboratory we are supporting people to appreciate the learning process in themselves and others and to claim new direction and goals.**
9. **Feeling and emotion provide energy for accomplishing our goals. As the energy increases in the laboratory, individuals begin to have an increased desire to get what they need from the environment.** The design needs to invite out people's interests and to support them in getting what they need.
10. About midway in the laboratory week there is an obvious openness to being influenced by each other, a willingness to be helpful to each other. We begin to talk more openly and naturally about our values and beliefs. **We express an appreciation for the way others are confirming our values and strengthening our relationships.**
11. To get to know each other well over the course of a week involves **getting a sense of each other's histories.** When we do this historical review, we notice whether an individual:
  - a) Has learned from his/her experience;
  - b) Ignored or disowned her/ his experience; or
  - c) Has strangely contrived an explanation that has personal meaning and does not make sense to others. In short we learn where each individual is currently in the "learning how to learn curriculum."
12. In the hundreds of human relations events I've been a part of, I have learned that I can expect healing, wisdom, and inspiration from any event in which there is an attempt by those who lead to demonstrate being an open, warm and compassionate person. **A concept of the self is crucial for doing this work, and if the staff are attempting to model awareness, responsibility, and share their sense of self. A critical mass of the group will follow.**

13. It is crucial that all groupings within the laboratory give an ongoing opportunity for individuals to monitor their own organismic guidance, **their own conscience about the learning process.**
14. The history of this human relations laboratory is a story of what happens again and again as an individual is encouraged to live up to personal goals, conscience, and their concept of self. **Growth or psychological adjustment occurs when we return to the task of intending authenticity.**
15. **Healing and growth happen when individuals disappoint themselves and/or others yet acknowledge this failure in the presence of others and together re-establish a fresh commitment to being a good person and open to growth.**
16. Most difficult moments within an individual, within groups, and within the laboratory as a whole are caused by a perceived threat to the “self structure” or integrity of the individual, group, or community. **Is it not interesting to notice how intensely individuals can care about the dynamics of a group or a community if it threatens their sense of what is right, proper, and agreed-upon?**
17. During a full week of community learning in which the integrity of the self is honored and relationships are supported, **there are periods in which there is a complete absence of threat to self and relationship, and these are times when great changes can be made and transformational learning happens.** In the absence of judgment the individual exults in the freedom to learn and the group is rewarded with a sense of unity.
18. **As time goes on and the individual has a variety of unthreatening experiences, there is a growing awareness of how we are all similar. We drop our guard, open our hearts, and understand ourselves both as individuals and partners in relationship.**
19. **When an individual has found herself or himself accepted—strengths, weaknesses, and potential—there is an openness to learning and change that makes conscious the individual’s organismic valuing process.** Each individual, having been freed of self-judgment, becomes aware of his or her own desire to be a good and compassionate person. Empowered to offer relationship to others--“unconditional positive regard” becomes possible.

I heard Carl Rogers say that after all the books he had read and the books he had written, he found himself learning most frequently from relationship experiences

with people wherein he was drawn out to understand what he already knew or had read about. **A human relations laboratory is a place to come, having been spun around a great deal by life, in order to slow down, find your heart, remember what you truly desire for your life, and then allow in the energy and wisdom that you need to get on about it. Lab is particularly a good idea for people who want to improve their lives without having to prove something else first. This is why it all begins with acceptance, which is regenerative, transformative, and empowering.**