



Freedom to Learn Redux


A Review of

On Becoming an Effective Teacher: Person-Centered Teaching, Psychology, Philosophy, and Dialogues With Carl R. Rogers and Harold Lyon

by Carl R. Rogers, Harold C. Lyon Jr., and Reinhard Tausch
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Reviewed by

James H. Korn 

Carl Rogers was one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century. That influence was primarily on counseling and psychotherapy, but he also applied his ideas to education. His book *Freedom to Learn* (Rogers, 1969) provided a guide to person-centered teaching and learning, and went through several editions including *Freedom to Learn for the 80's* (Rogers, 1983). In *On Becoming an Effective Teacher: Person-Centered Teaching, Psychology, Philosophy, and Dialogues With Carl R. Rogers and Harold Lyon*, Lyon has put together his recorded dialogues with Rogers, previously unpublished writing by Rogers, and two research reports on person-centered teaching in Germany. He intends this book to be a "catalyst" for 21st-century readers by sharing his and Rogers's personal experiences and "empirical evidence that person-centered learning leads to student achievement" (p. 77).

What teachers will learn about becoming more effective is that they should be genuine in the classroom and have empathy for their students, along with other student-centered ideas from Rogers's earlier books. Extensive research is cited to support that view. However, teachers also will hear some radical ideas with no research support: no grading, and school should not be compulsory. And they will not learn anything about other skills and methods of teaching that might lead to effectiveness.

We should not be surprised to find few new ideas here. Rogers died in 1987. The introduction by Florian Eitel reveals that Rogers was Lyon's mentor and that in the late 1970s they agreed to write this book. However, "The manuscript went into a file cabinet in Hal's attic as Hal mourned the loss of his mentor" (p. xvii). Historians of psychology may find things of interest in this book, but for developing teachers, there is not too much.

As mentor and icon, Rogers is given the honor of first authorship. Harold Lyon has an unusually multifaceted background in public and private education. He is a graduate of West Point who, as an Army Ranger, applied principles of person-centered leadership to a rifle

company in the 101st Airborne Division. And he has received awards at film and video festivals.

The third author of the book is Reinhard Tausch, emeritus professor at the University of Hamburg. He provided the two chapters on research in Germany but does not appear to have contributed elsewhere in this book, so his coauthorship may also be honorary.

On Becoming an Effective Teacher is in four parts, each of which begins with a dialogue between Rogers and Lyon. Rogers's philosophy of teaching is given in the first dialogue:

This approach is based on person-centered freedom—to learn and to live. It eliminates every one of the elements of conventional education. It does not rely on a carefully prescribed curriculum, but rather on one that is largely self-chosen; instead of standard assignments for all, each student sets his own assignment; lectures constitute the most infrequent mode of instruction; standardized tests lose their sanctified place; grades are either self-determined or become a relatively unimportant index of learning. (p. 3)

The teacher as person was even more important to Rogers than these structural elements. These teachers value "genuineness, empathy, spontaneity, caring about others and being more process than content oriented" (p. 30). They also have "grit," defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (p. 41). These are the essentials of Rogerian education that receive elaboration here and there throughout the book. The authors cite evidence that the personal qualities they value can be trained. That puzzles me in that, if I am not an open person, can I really be "genuine" after my training?

In "Listening and Being Listened To" (Chapter 7), Rogers becomes the person centered on. He said how important it is to "really hear someone" by "hearing deeply" (p. 68). He liked to be heard and was frustrated when he was not understood and satisfied when he could be real. This sounds to me like a good therapist, which is exactly what Rogers was in most of his life. Philip Jackson (1984) made this point in a review of Rogers's *Freedom to Learn for the 80's*. He suggested "leaving [Rogers] as a psychotherapist rather than accepting him as an educator. . . . A therapist he is and must remain" (p. 41).

Lyon frequently proclaims the extensive research base of meta-analyses that support the effectiveness of person-centered teaching. Chapter 12 describes research done in the 1970s, and Chapter 13 reports research done in Germany, also in the 1970s. The methods used appear sound, but I have the same criticism that Jackson had in his 1984 review: "Unfortunately, the studies are not reported in sufficient detail to allow adequate evaluation of them" (para. 6).

Chapter 14 reports recent research by Tausch and one of his graduate students that was deemed important enough to hold up publication of the book. They show that students do not like rude (nonempathic) teachers and "cry out for empathy" (p. 134), which can be trained. The research apparently was not peer reviewed but is not bad. It is, however, an indication of how this book was patched together from old files and favors to friends.

Nowhere in this book is there recognition or discussion of the need for variations in using person-centered teaching related to students' educational level. The implication is that it can be used at any level and "in any field of knowledge" (p. 92). Much of the discussion in the

dialogues is directed toward K–12, especially gifted and talented students with whom Lyon has had extensive experience. Lyon also devotes a chapter (17) to training medical teachers. It seems highly unlikely that the approach that Rogers favored would work as well, if at all, with first-graders learning to read, a high school calculus class, a medical school anatomy course, and Lyon’s rifle company.

The central message from Rogers is critically important for teachers: You must care about your students and learn to express that caring. And I thank Lyon for including the value of “grit” for the hard work and dedication needed to be an effective teacher (Winerman, 2013, interview with Angela Duckworth).

Beyond those two basic messages, I cannot recommend this book as helpful for teachers who want to be more effective. In fact, Lyon says teaching is overrated. Fans of Rogers still living in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s will enjoy hearing his voice again regarding his admiration for dropping out, his mistrust of marriage, and the irrelevance of religious institutions, as well as birthing by candlelight. Lyon’s final thoughts include, “Carl was as imperfect as the rest of us and was sometimes just wrong” (p. 189).

References

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