

# HUMANISTIC LEARNING THEORY: EDUCATION IN SEARCH OF ITS SOUL

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Education has lost its soul. The idealism of the 70s was crushed upon the rocks of the back-to-the-basics movement of the 80s. In today's hyper-testing environment, there is little room for real learning, creativity, innovation, passion, and curiosity. Today, education today is more about what we do to students than what students do. Adopting a humanistic approach to education is one way to find our way back.

## HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

Humanistic education is a reaction to a system of education that is seen as de-humanizing and a set of conditions for learning that some consider inhumane. In many schools students are often asked to be passive learners or required to learn in ways that are not natural for them. They are forced to learn things that are abstract or have no connection to their real world experiences. They are manipulated by external rewards, competition and the fear of failure. Only the cognitive dimension of their humanity is acknowledged. And, only traditional ways of knowing and being in the world are seen to be of worth.

Humanistic education provides an alternative to the traditional factory model of education that treats students as products on a 13-year conveyer belt. In these educational factories high standards are synonymous with standardization as all students are force fed the same curriculum. The same facts and skills are attached to all students at pre-determined places as they march silently along in lock step likes cars moving down an assembly line. Efficiency, uniformity, and control of students and teachers are valued over creativity, innovation, individuality, and freedom. Teaching the curriculum becomes more important than teaching students. Traits that can be measured and quantified are valued over creativity, inspiration, and intuition.

On this educational conveyer belt teachers are thought of as mere factory workers. They are told what to teach, how to teach, and when to teach it. Standardized tests are used as a system of quality control to determine the effectiveness of the factory workers and to insure the quality of the educational product (students). Educational produces are described in terms of numbers and percentile rankings. They are sorted, categorized, labeled, and defined by how far they are away from some mythical norm.

## A THEORY OF LEARNING AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

There are a variety of perspectives related to exactly what humanistic learning theory is; however, two big ideas seem to stand out: First, the ultimate purpose of true education, from this theoretical perspective, is human development and personal growth (as opposed to higher test scores). Focus on these will naturally enhance and increase intellectual and academic achievement and prepare students to contribute to global as well as local communities. Second human nature is basically good. That is, humans have a natural inclination to learn, to grow, and develop fully. As such, education is most effective when it aligns with this natural inclination. Humanistic learning theory describes learning in terms of these natural tendencies.

### *Humanistic Education*

Humanistic learning theory, when correctly applied in an educational setting, compliments and enhances academic learning, intellectual growth, and the development of

knowledge and skills. According to this theory, learning is enhanced by making personal connections to students' lives, emotions, and experiences. This enables students to learn more and learn more deeply. Here students learn in the traditional sense of acquiring a designated body of knowledge and a set of skills, but at the same time, they are able to make personal connections to subject matter and to other human beings. As such, academic learning provides a context for personal growth as well as the development of knowledge and skills that are necessary to thrive in the world.

### **An Evolutionary Tendency**

Humanistic learning theory is based on the premise that all humans have a natural tendency to grow, to learn, and to develop fully. Carl Rogers described this as an instinctive inner core that moves people toward reaching their full potential (Rogers, 1969). Abraham Maslow (1968) used the term "self-actualization" to describe humans' innate, natural progression to their highest state. Humanistic education then seeks to create educational experiences that align with these natural desires. When students learn naturally, they learn more, they learn more joyously, and they learn more deeply. However, when students are coerced into learning through external motivation they learn less and they learn to not like learning.

## **THE BASICS OF HUMANISTIC LEARNING THEORY**

Humanistic learning theory describes learning in terms of personal growth and the full development of each human's potential not on just an intellectual level, but also on an emotional, psychological, creative, social, physical, and even spiritual level (DeCarvalho, 1991; Maslow, 1971; Morris, 1978; Rogers, 1969; Patterson, 1973). Based on this, five common goals of humanistic education are identified:

1. to facilitate the development of fully functioning, self-actualized human beings who have the capacity to nurture themselves, others, and their environment;
2. to instill a joy of learning and a desire to be life-long learners;
3. to promote the discovery of each student's passions, special talents, and abilities;
4. to teach the knowledge and skills necessary for students to be good decision makers and effective problem solvers.
5. to enable students to be responsible world citizens who are able to contribute to democratic societies.

### **Supporting Principles of Humanistic Education**

The following supporting principles of human education can help in achieving the above goals:

**1. Students' learning should be as self-directed as possible.** In other words, students should be given choices about what they learn, how they learn, and how they demonstrate their learning, **to the greatest degree possible.** Choice does not mean total choice all the time. Choice means as much as meets the situation. Choice exists on a continuum from no choices every on the far end to total choice all the time on the other end. For example, you can offer:

- *no choice.* "Boys and girls, we're studying the Civil War this month. This is the book we're going to read. This is the topic you'll be doing reports on."
- *a choice within a set.* "Boys and girls, I've put out five books for you, you can choose the one you wish to read."
- *a choice within a category.* "Boys and girls, we're studying the Civil War this month, you can read any book or investigate any topic related to the Civil War."
- *total choice.* "Boys and girls, find a topic that interests and inspires you for your

research project. These are the criteria. This is the due date. Find a book that you love for our reading class.

Some students or situations require more choice, some less choice. The goal would be to provide the least restrictive environment. This would mean there would be the minimum amount of control necessary to create a positive learning experience.

**2. The subject matter to be learned should be relevant to the lives or personal interests of the students.** It should be connected to the students' lives or interests whenever possible and to the greatest extent possible. For example, when learning number facts in the primary grades, students would be asked to use them to figure out problems in real life situations. Humanistic teachers find creative ways for mandated subject matter to reflect or connect with students' lives. At the same time, space is provided within a curriculum for students to explore topics of interest to them. For example, adolescents are extremely interested in topics related to social experiences, relationships, and defining ones self in terms of values and future roles or occupations. Humanistic educator would seek to incorporate these themes within a variety of subject areas.

**3. The full spectrum of the human experience should be included in the educational experience.** Emotions, relationships, creativity, imagination, intuition, and real life problems are all part of the human experience. Including them in the educational experience enhances learning. Humanistic educators create the conditions where human beings can learn to use their knowledge as well as intellect, emotions, and intuition to solve problem, make decisions, or come to know the world.

Humanistic educators involve the whole human in the learning experience. Traditional curriculum and related knowledge and skills are studied but in a multidimensional context. Students would be asked to examine and explore how topics impacted or connected with their personal lives and experiences as well as the lives of other human beings. Art, drama, music, and other arts would be used as tools to explore or respond to information and ideas. Important pedagogical tools would include inquiry, discovery learning, social learning, and cooperative learning activities.

**4. Schools should produce students who want to learn and know how to learn.** Humanistic educators build on students' natural desire to learn by asking them to learn about things that are relevant to their lives and by helping them to make the connections. Curriculum is designed around students' natural ways of learning and includes things about which students want to learn. As well, students are taught how to learn. That is, how to get the necessary information they need, how to critically analyze and evaluate that information, and how to use and apply it.

**5. Students learn best in a non-threatening environment.** Threats come in the form of physical threats, but also social threats, emotional threats, or things that endanger one's self esteem. When school becomes too much about competition and measuring up, there invariably is population that experiences failure. There is average and those who fall on either side of average.

### **THE HUMANISTIC EDUCATOR**

For the humanistic educator, teaching starts with a relationship. Carl Rogers (1969) describes three conditions for learning based on his work in creating therapeutic relationships with his clients. They are:

**1. Respect.** Each student is respected, what Rogers (1961) calls unconditional positive

regard (UPR). Students are accepted for who they are, unconditionally. Note that this is much different from accepting unacceptable behavior. This respect for students helps to promote their own self-respect and sense of self-efficacy, which in turn enhances learning.

**2. Empathetic understanding.** Teachers strive to see things from the child's point of view. They understand what it feels like to be excited, lost, confused, frustrated, curious, anxious, confident, or bored. They know what it feels like to have a teacher who cares for you, who is rooting for you to succeed, we believe that you are of worth and can accomplish things.

**3. Genuineness or congruence.** Teachers teach from their real, authentic self. They are not play a role or projecting what they believe a teacher should be. Rather, they are in touch with their own feelings and reacting authentically. Genuine teachers don't have to rely on methods or techniques; instead, they can trust their own emotions and experiences to guide them. (This is not to say that research-based strategies aren't important; instead, genuine teachers teach children not programs, methods, or strategies.)

Once these conditions are met, then learning can begin. These conditions serve to enhance, not diminish, academic learning and intellectual development.

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