SAMUEL TENENBAUM

Carl R. Rogers and Non-Directive Teaching

"Non-directive teaching has profound implications which even those who accept this point of view cannot at present fully fathom. Its importance goes beyond the classroom and extends to every area where human beings communicate and try to live with one another."

AS ONE interested in education, I have participated in a classroom methodology that is so unique and so special that I feel impelled to share the experience. The technique, it seems to me, is so radically different from the customary and the accepted, so undermining of the old, that it should be known more widely. As good a description of the process as any—I suppose the one that Carl R. Rogers, the instructor, himself would be inclined to use—would be "non-directive" teaching.

I had some notion what that term meant, but frankly I was not prepared for anything that proved so overwhelming. It is not that I am convention-bound. My strongest educational influences stem from William Heard Kilpatrick and John Dewey, and anyone who has even the slightest acquaintance with their thinking would know that it does not smack of the narrow or the provincial. But this method which I saw Dr. Rogers carry out in a course which he gave at Brandeis University was so unusual, something I could not believe possible, unless I was part of the experience. I hope I shall manage to describe the method in a way to give you some inkling of the feelings, the emotions, the warmth and the enthusiasms that the method engendered.

The course was altogether unstructured; and it was exactly that. At no moment did any one know, not even the instructor, what the next moment would bring forth in the classroom, what subject would come up for discussion, what questions would be raised, what personal needs, feelings and emotions aired. This atmosphere of non-structured freedom—as free as human beings could allow each other to be free—was set by Dr. Rogers himself. In a friendly, relaxed way, he sat down with the students (about 25 in number) around a large table and said it would be nice if we stated our purpose and introduced ourselves. There ensued a strained silence; no one spoke up. Finally, to break it, one student timidly raised his hand and spoke his piece. Another uncomfortable silence, and then another upraised hand. Thereafter, the hands rose more rapidly. At no time did the instructor urge any student to speak.

Unstructured Approach

Afterwards, he informed the class that he had brought with him quantities of material—reprints, brochures, articles, books; he handed out a bibliography of recommended reading. At no time did he indicate that he expected students to read or do anything else. As I recall, he made only one request. Would some student volunteer to set up this material in a special room which had been reserved for students of the course? Two students promptly volunteered. He also said he had with him recorded tapes of therapeutic sessions and also reels of motion pictures. This created a flurry of excitement, and students asked whether they could be heard and seen and Dr. Rogers answered yes. The class then decided how it could be done best. Students volunteered to run tape recorders, find a movie projector; for the most part this too was student initiated and arranged.

Thereafter followed four hard, frustrating sessions. During this period, the class didn't seem to get anywhere. Students spoke at random, saying whatever came into their heads. It all seemed chaotic, aimless, a waste of time. A student would bring up some aspect of Rogers' philosophy; and the next student, completely disregarding the first, would take the group away in another direction; and a third, completely disregarding the first two, would start fresh on something else altogether. At times there were some faint efforts at a cohesive discussion, but for the most part the classroom proceedings seemed to lack continuity and direction. The instructor received every contribution with attention and regard. He did not find any student's contribution in order or out of order.

The class was not prepared for such a totally unstructured approach. They

This provocative article is a companion piece to "Significant Learning: In Therapy and in Education," by Carl R. Rogers, published last month in this journal. Dr. Tenenbaum gives the frank, insightful reactions of a member of a class conducted by Dr. Rogers.

did not know how to proceed. In their perplexity and frustration, they demanded that the teacher play the role assigned to him by custom and tradition; that he set forth for us in authoritative language what was right and wrong, what was good and bad. Had they not come from far distances to learn from the oracle himself? Were they not fortunate? Were they not about to be initiated in the right rituals and practices by the great man himself, the founder of the movement that bears his name? The notebooks were poised for the climactic moment when the oracle would give forth, but mostly they remained untouched.

Queerly enough, from the outset, even in their anger, the members of the group felt joined together, and outside the classroom, there was an excitement and a ferment, for even in their frustration, they had communicated as never before in any classroom, and probably never before in quite the way they had. The class was bound together by a common, unique experience. In the Rogers class, they had spoken their minds; the words did not come from a book, nor were they the reflection of the instructor's thinking, nor that of any other authority. The ideas, emotions and feelings came from themselves; and this was the releasing and the exciting process.

In this atmosphere of freedom, something for which they had not bargained and for which they were not prepared, the students spoke up as students seldom do. During this period, the instructor

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took many blows; and it seemed to me that many times he appeared to be shaken; and although he was the source of our irritation, we had, strange as it may seem, a great affection for him, for it did not seem right to be angry with a man who was so sympathetic, so sensitive to the feelings and ideas of others. We all felt that what was involved was some slight misunderstanding, which once understood and remedied would make everything right again. But our instructor, gentle enough on the surface, had a "whim of steel." He didn't seem to understand; and if he did, he was obstinate and obdurate; he refused to come around. Thus did this tug-of-war continue. We all looked to Rogers and Rogers looked to us. One student, amid general approbation, observed: "We are Rogers-centered, not student-centered. We have come to learn from Rogers."

Encouraging Thinking

Another student had discovered that Rogers had been influenced by Kilpatrick and Dewey, and using this idea as a springboard, he said he thought he perceived what Rogers was trying to get at. He thought Rogers wanted students to think independently, creatively; he wanted students to become deeply involved with their very persons, their very selves, hoping that this might lead to the "reconstruction" of the person—in the Dewey sense of the term—the person's outlook, attitudes, values, behavior. This would be a true reconstruction of experience; it would be learning in a real sense. Certainly, he didn't want the course to end in an examination based on textbooks and lectures, followed by the traditional end-term grade, which generally means completion and forgetting.[1] Rogers had expressed the belief almost from the outset of the course that no one can teach anyone else anything. But thinking, this student insisted, begins at the fork in the road, the famed dilemma set up by Dewey. As we reach the fork in the road, we do not know which road to take if we are to reach our destination; and then we begin to examine the situation. Thinking starts at that point.

Kilpatrick also sought original thinking from his students and also rejected a regurgitant textbook kind of learning, but he presented crucial problems for discussion, and these problems aroused a great deal of interest, and they also created vast changes in the person. Why can't committees of students or individual students get up such problems for discussion?[2] Rogers listened sympathetically and said, "I see you feel strongly about this?" That disposed of that. If I re-

[1] It should be noted that Dr. Rogers neither agreed nor disagreed. It was not his habit to respond to students' contributions unless a remark was directed specifically to him; and even then he might choose not to answer. His main object, it seemed to me, was to follow students' contributions intelligently and sympathetically.

[2] One student compiled such a list, had them mimeographed, distributed them, and for practical purposes that was the end of that.

In this connection, another illustration may be in order. At the first session, Rogers brought to class tape recordings of therapeutic sessions. He explained that he was not comfortable in a teacher's role and he came "loaded," and the recordings served as a sort of security. One student continually insisted that he play the recordings, and after considerable pressure from the class, he did so, but he complied reluctantly; and all told, despite the pressure, he did not play them for more than an hour in all the sessions. Apparently, Rogers preferred the students to make real live recordings rather than listen to those which could only interest them in an academic way.

call correctly, the next student who spoke completely disregarded what had been suggested and started afresh on another topic, quite in conformity with the custom set by the class.

Spasmodically, through the session, students referred favorably to the foregoing suggestion, and they began to demand more insistently that Rogers assume the traditional role of a teacher. At this point, the blows were coming Rogers' way rather frequently and strongly and I thought I saw him bend somewhat before them. (Privately, he denied he was so affected.) During one session, a student made the suggestion that he lecture one hour and that we have a class discussion the next. This one suggestion seemed to fit into his plans. He said he had with him an unpublished paper. He warned us that it was available and we could read it by ourselves. But the student said it would not be the same. The person, the author, would be out of it, the stress, the inflection, the emotion, those nuances which give value and meaning to words. Rogers then asked the students if that was what they wanted. They said yes. He read for over an hour. After the vivid and acrimonious exchanges to which we had become accustomed, this was certainly a let down, dull and soporific to the extreme. This experience squelched all further demands for lecturing. In one of the moments when he apologized for this episode ("It's better, more excusable, when students demand it."), he said: "You asked me to lecture. It is true I am a resource, but what sense would there be in my lecturing? I have brought a great quantity of material, reprints of any number of lectures, articles, books, tape recordings, movies."

By the fifth session, something definite had happened; there was no mistaking that. Students spoke to one another; they by-passed Rogers. Students asked to be heard and wanted to be heard, and what before was a halting, stammering, self-conscious group became an interacting group, a brand, new cohesive unit, carrying on in a unique way; and from them came discussion and thinking such as no other group but this could repeat or duplicate. The instructor also joined in, but his role, more important than any in the group, somehow became merged with the group; the group was important, the center, the base of operation, not the instructor.

What caused it? I can only conjecture as to the reason. I believe that what happened was this: For four sessions the students refused to believe that the instructor would refuse to play the traditional role. They still believed that he would set the tasks; that he would be the center of whatever happened and that he would manipulate the group. It took the class four sessions to realize that they were wrong; that he came to them with nothing outside of himself, outside of his own person; that if they really wanted something to happen, it was they who had to provide the content—an uncomfortable, challenging situation indeed. It was they who had to speak up, with all the risks that that entailed. As part of the process, they shared, they took exception, they agreed, they disagreed. At any rate, their persons, their deepest selves were involved; and from this situation, this special, unique group, this new creation was born.

Importance of Acceptance

As you may know, Rogers believes that if a person is accepted, fully accepted, and in this acceptance there is no judgment, only compassion and sympathy, the individual is able to come to grips

with himself, to develop the courage to give up his defenses and face his true self. I saw this process work. Amid the early efforts to communicate, to find a *modus vivendi,* there had been in the group tentative exchanges of feelings, emotions and ideas, but after the fourth session, and progressively thereafter, this group, haphazardly thrown together, became close to one another and their true selves appeared. As they interacted, there were moments of insight and revelation and understanding that were almost awesome in nature; they were what, I believe, Rogers would describe as "moments of therapy," those pregnant moments when you see a human soul revealed before you, in all its breathless wonder; and then a silence, almost like reverence, would overtake the class. And each member of the class became enveloped with a warmth and a loveliness that border on the mystic. I for one, and I am quite sure the others also, never had an experience quite like this. It was learning and therapy; and by therapy I do not mean illness, but what might be characterized by a healthy change in the person, an increase in his flexibility, his openness, his willingness to listen. In the process, we all felt elevated, freer, more accepting of ourselves and others, more open to new ideas, trying hard to understand and accept.

This is not a perfect world, and there was evidence of hostility as members differed. Somehow in this setting every blow was softened, as if the sharp edges had been removed; if undeserved, students would go off to something else; and the blow was somehow lost. In my own case, even those students who originally irritated me, with further acquaintance I began to accept and respect; and the thought occurred to me as I tried to understand what was happening: Once you come close to a person, perceive his thoughts, his emotions, his feelings, he becomes not only understandable but good and desirable. Some of the more aggressive ones spoke more than they should, more than their right share, but the group itself, by its own being, not by setting rules, eventually made its authority felt; and unless a person was very sick or insensitive, members more or less, in this respect, conformed to what was expected of them. The problem—the hostile, the dominant, the neurotic—was not too acute; and yet if measured in a formal way, with a stop watch, at no time was a session free of aimless talk and waste of time. But yet as I watched the process, the idea persisted that perhaps this waste of time may be necessary; it may very well be that that is the way man learns best; for certainly, as I look back at the whole experience, I am fairly certain that it would have been impossible to learn as much or as well or as thoroughly in the traditional classroom setting. If we accept Dewey's definition of education as the reconstruction of experience, what better way can a person learn than by becoming involved with his whole self, his very person, his root drives, emotions, attitudes and values? No series of facts or arguments, no matter how logically or brilliantly arranged, can even faintly compare with that sort of thing.

In the course of this process, I saw hard, inflexible, dogmatic persons, in the brief period of several weeks, change in front of my eyes and become sympathetic, understanding and to a marked degree non-judgmental. I saw neurotic, compulsive persons ease up and become more accepting of themselves and others. In one instance, a student who particularly impressed me by his change, told me when I mentioned this: "It is true.

I feel less rigid, more open to the world. And I like myself better for it. I don't believe I ever learned so much anywhere." I saw shy persons become less shy and aggressive persons more sensitive and moderate.

One might say that this appears to be essentially an emotional process. But that I believe would be altogether inaccurate in describing it. There was a great deal of intellectual content, but the intellectual content was meaningful and crucial to the person, in a sense that it meant a great deal to him as a person. In fact, one student brought up this very question. "Should we be concerned," he asked, "only with the emotions? Has the intellect no play?" It was my turn to ask, "Is there any student who has read as much or thought as much for any other course?"

The answer was obvious. We had spent hours and hours reading; the room reserved for us had occupants until 10 o'clock at night, and then many left only because the university guards wanted to close the building. Students listened to recordings; they saw motion pictures; but best of all, they talked and talked and talked. In the traditional course, the instructor lectures and indicates what is to be read and learned; students dutifully record all this in their notebooks, take an examination and feel good or bad, depending on the outcome; but in nearly all cases it is a complete experience, with a sense of finality; the laws of forgetting begin to operate rapidly and inexorably. In the Rogers course, students read and thought inside and outside the class; it was they who chose from this reading and thinking what was meaningful to them, not the instructor.

This non-directive kind of teaching, I should point out, was not 100 percent successful. There were three or four students who found the whole idea distasteful. Even at the end of the course, although nearly all became enthusiastic, one student to my knowledge was intensely negative in his feelings; another was highly critical. These wanted the instructor to provide them with a rounded-out intellectual piece of merchandise which they could commit to memory and then give back on an examination. They would then have the assurance that they had learned what they should. As one said, "If I had to make a report as to what I learned in this course, what could I say?" Admittedly, it would be much more difficult than in a traditional course, if not impossible.

The Rogers method was free and flowing and open and permissive. A student would start an interesting discussion; it would be taken up by a second; but a third student might take us away in another direction, bringing up a personal matter of no interest to the class; and we would all feel frustrated. But this was like life, flowing on like a river, seemingly futile, with never the same water there, flowing on, with no one knowing what would happen the next moment. But in this there was an expectancy, an alertness, an aliveness; it seemed to me as near a smear of life as one could get in a classroom. For the authoritarian person, who puts his faith in neatly piled up facts, this method I believe can be threatening, for here he gets no reassurance, only an openness, a flowing, no closure.

A New Methodology

I believe that a great deal of the stir and the ferment that characterized the class was due to this lack of closure. In the lunch room, one could recognize Rogers' students by their animated discussions, by their desire to be together;

and sometimes, since there was no table large enough, they would sit two and three tiers deep; and they would eat with plates on their laps. As Rogers himself points out, there is no finality in the process. He himself never summarizes (against every conventional law of teaching). The issues are left unresolved; the problems raised in class are always in a state of flux, on-going. In their need to know, to come to some agreement, students gather together, wanting understanding, seeking closure. Even in the matter of grades, there is no closure. A grade means an end; but Dr. Rogers does not give the grade; it is the student who suggests the grade; and since he does so, even this sign of completion is left unresolved, without an end, unclosed. Also, since the course is unstructured, each has staked his person in the course; he has spoken, not with the textbook as the gauge, but with his person, and thus as a self he has communicated with others, and because of this, in contradistinction to the impersonal subject matter that comprises the normal course, there develops this closeness and warmth.

To describe the many gracious acts that occurred might convey some idea of this feeling of closeness. One student invited the class to her home for a cookout. Another student, a priest from Spain, was so taken with the group that he talked of starting a publication to keep track of what was happening to the group members after they disbanded. A group interested in student counseling met on its own. A member arranged for the class to visit a mental hospital for children and adults; also he arranged for us to see the experimental work being done with psychotic patients by Dr. Lindsley. Class members brought in tape recordings and printed matter to add to the library material set aside for our use. In every way the spirit of good-will and friendliness was manifest to an extent that happens only in rare and isolated instances. In the many, many courses I have taken I have not seen the like. In this connection, it should be pointed out that the members comprised a group that had been haphazardly thrown together; they had come from many backgrounds and they included a wide age range.

I believe that what has been described above is truly a creative addition to classroom methodology; it is radically different from the old. That it has the capacity to move people, to make them freer, more open-minded, more flexible, I have no doubt. I myself witnessed the power of this method. I believe that nondirective teaching has profound implications which even those who accept this point of view cannot at present fully fathom. Its importance, I believe, goes beyond the classroom and extends to every area where human beings communicate and try to live with one another.

More specifically, as a classroom methodology, it warrants the widest discussion, inquiry and experimentation. It has the possibility of opening up a whole new dimension of thinking, fresh and original, for in its approach, in its practice, in its philosophy it differs so fundamentally from the old. It seems to me this approach ought to be tried out in every area of learning—elementary, high school, college, wherever human beings gather to learn and improve on the old. At this stage we should not be overly concerned about its limitations and inadequacies, since the method has not been refined and we do not know as much about it as we ought. As a new technique, it starts off with a handicap.

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Some Current Proposals

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ing these proposals it should be recalled that play is the work of a five-year-old and to expect him to sit for prolonged periods at a desk doing paper and pencil work is contrary to the best that we know about this developmental level of children. It is through play and activity that five year olds are best prepared for the first grade. Consideration should be given, also, to the fact that children learn best that which they can relate to their own experiential background and that which comes within the phenomenological range of the individual. The more the subject matter or activities provided are outside of the individual's ability to integrate and assimilate the material, the more we must resort to artificial devices to stimulate learning. The more closely the materials are related to the individual's own life experience the less need there is for concern over the factor of motivation.

As the current proposals for integration and continuity are reviewed it seems that many of these are in the form of mechanical devices such as departmentalization, grouping, and acceleration. In general their proponents seem to avoid the real issue, which is that effective teaching is a matter of a high degree of interpersonal relationships between a teacher and a child and among the children themselves. This can only be achieved if we point out to the lay public the necessity of high professional standards for teachers, of small classes, and of adequate materials. The more vigorously we are able to impress upon the patrons of the school that these are the real issues, the more rapidly we will be able to discard, and the less need we will have to resort to mechanical devices to solve our basic problems in education.

Carl R. Rogers

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We are loath to give up the old. The old is bolstered by tradition, authority and respectability; and we ourselves are its product. If we view education, however, as the reconstruction of experience, does not this presume that the individual must do his own reconstructing? He must do it himself, through the reorganization of his deepest self, his values, his attitudes, his very person. What better method is there to engross the individual; to bring him, his ideas, his feelings into communication with others; to break down the barriers that create isolation in a world where for his own mental safety and health, man has to learn to be part of mankind?

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