



## Person-centered technology enhanced learning: Dimensions of added value

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### ABSTRACT

Extensive research has shown that person-centered learning aiming at students' development on the levels of intellect, skills, and attitudes is effective in face-to-face education. More recently, advances in web-technology let us ask: *Is humanistic, person-centered learning also effective along the application of modern technology?* In this contribution we reflect 10 years of research at the University of Vienna, Austria. Essentially, we found that, given learners perceive the teacher's or facilitator's person-centered attitudes and courses employ a thoughtful blend of face-to-face and online elements, courses tend to be perceived by students as carrying value far beyond just cognitive gains: for example, students indicate that – more than with traditional instruction – they are motivated to engage in active, self-initiated learning. In particular, they improve their team skills, interpersonal relationships, and become better listeners. They learn significantly from the multiple perspectives they perceive.

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### 1. Introduction

Computers and the Internet have changed many areas of our lives. One of the fields that has been undergoing profound change is learning. The availability of personal computers for young people and the comfortable, almost omnipresent access to the Internet surely have influenced the scenarios as well as goals of education and corresponding research (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005). While some decades ago we asked whether eLearning would demonstrably enhance or reduce education, these days kids and adolescents perceive educational offerings that do not include technology at all as “ancient” and “dusty” and tend to prefer teachers who have digital competences!

Interestingly, almost half a century ago the humanistic American psychologist Carl Rogers envisaged the primary value of education in dealing with and adapting to change. He wrote: *We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education [...] is the facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn [...] how to adapt and change [...]. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world. [...] Out of such a context arise students, real learners, creative scientists and scholars, and practitioners, the kind of individuals who can live in a delicate but ever-changing balance between what is presently*

*known and the flowing, moving, altering problems and facts of the future (Rogers, 1983).*

In this paper we review a decade of research and practice at the University of Vienna, Austria, Faculty of Computer Science where, step by step, we designed and incorporated web-based, open source technology to support person-centered learning. A pivotal idea was to design open source web 2.0 technology to fit the needs of person-centered learning and teaching in academic courses and not vice versa. Thus, each single module such as “peer evaluation” or “team-space” of our learning platform CEWebS (Mangler & Derntl, 2004) was designed to facilitate the use of some pedagogical element in hybrid or “blended” learning. Generally speaking, we started from the hypothesis that for our students at the University of Vienna a thoughtful mix of face-to-face sessions and eLearning would be superior to either pure eLearning or pure face-to-face classes. As will be argued later, this starting hypothesis was confirmed by students' responses in numerous classes.

To make this paper self-contained, the next chapter introduces key characteristics and goals of person-centered learning and illustrates its enhancement through web 2.0 technology. Chapter three, which is the central one, indicates research evidence on the added value and effectiveness of PCEl along several dimensions such as learning on three levels, increased motivation, community building and improvement in interpersonal relationships. In Chapter four we sketch open question and future lines of research, Chapter five concludes the paper.

### 2. Person-centered technology enhanced learning

In a nutshell, person-centered learning is a kind of significant, experiential learning that is characterized as follows: significant

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learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning. When we learn in that way, we are whole, utilizing all our masculine and feminine capacities (Rogers, 1983). In this spirit, person-centered “Teaching” can be characterized by the following goals. It aims toward (Rogers (1983) adapted and shortened):

- a climate of trust in which curiosity and the natural desire to learn can be nourished and enhanced;
- a participatory mode of decision-making in all aspects of learning in which students, teachers, and administrators have their part;
- helping students to achieve results they appreciate and consider worthwhile, to build their self-esteem and confidence;
- uncovering the excitement in intellectual and emotional discovery, which leads students to become life-long learners;
- developing in teachers the attitudes that research has shown to be most effective in facilitating learning;
- helping teachers to grow as persons finding rich satisfaction in their interactions with learners.

Research has shown that in order to facilitate the development of both subject-specific and generic competences effectively, teachers need to communicate three core attitudes in such a way that learners can perceive them (Rogers, 1983). But which attitudinal qualities are most essential, and under what conditions can significant, whole-person learning occur? The basic hypothesis underlying person-centered teaching and learning can be stated that human beings are constructive in nature and strive to actualize and expand their experiencing organisms. According to Rogers’ Theory of

Personality and Behavior (Rogers, 1959), this constructive tendency can unfold itself best in a climate that is characterized by three attitudinal conditions, also known as Rogers’ variables. They can best be described by referring to Carl Rogers’ original definitions:

**Realness, transparency.** *I have found that the more that I can be genuine in the relationship, the more helpful it will be. [...] Being genuine also involves the willingness to be and to express, in my words and my behavior, the various feelings and attitudes, which exist in me. [...] It is only by providing the genuine reality which is in me, that the other person can successfully seek for the reality in him (Rogers, 1961).* Other terms often used to characterize this attitude are: congruence, genuineness, openness, authenticity.

**Acceptance, unconditional positive regard.** *I find that the more acceptance and liking I feel toward this individual, the more I will be creating a relationship which he can use. By acceptance I mean a warm regard for him as a person of unconditional self-worth, of value no matter what his condition, his behavior, his feelings. It means a respect and liking for him as a separate person, a willingness for him to possess his own feelings in his own way (Rogers, 1961).* This non-possessive caring is also referred to as acknowledgment or respect towards the learner as a person.

**Understanding, empathy.** *[...] I feel a continuing desire to understand—a sensitive empathy which each of the client’s feelings and communications as they seem to him at that moment. Acceptance does not mean much until it involves understanding. It is only that I understand the feelings and thoughts [...] – it is only as I see them as you see*

Fig. 1. The team building facility as an example of a web 2.0 service in Derntl and Motschnig-Pitrik (2005).

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