

HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY, LEARNING AND TEACHING THE “WHOLE PERSON”

By

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ABSTRACT

Humanistic Psychology emphasizes five key principles: belief in the wholeness of human nature and experience; focus on free will and the individual power to create; realization that the human person lives "nested" in biology, culture and history; conscious intention is important to human development and action; and human life involves existential and spiritual questions. The humanistic educational process treats the child or the adult learner in accord with these principles. Some approaches for doing that are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The ideas of humanistic psychology and its allied fields of existential, transpersonal, mind/body, and positive psychology offer important suggestions and approaches to the education of children and adults in school and corporate settings and even in the practical setting of development projects. Six goals are addressed briefly in this article. They are: i) Some key ideas of the humanistic world view are described, ii) The current fragmentation and rapid change in present society that makes the humanistic approach particularly useful is argued, iii) Metaphor of the “dance that creates a larger story” as a metaphor for humanistic education suitable for our era, useful all over the world, especially in teaching adults is offered, iv) Some ways are offered to make education more effective with humanistic approach. Three cases showing the value of a humanistic educational approach in practical training in a rural development project and in a college setting are described.

Key Ideas of the Humanistic World View

The American Association of Humanistic Psychology describes the following five key principles of a humanistic approach that are relevant to education: a) *Subjective reality guides human behavior*, b) *Individual differences are more important than group characteristics*, c) *The goal of science should include discovery of the things that expand the human experience*, d) *A research goal should be to solve human problems*, and e) *A goal of psychology should be to understand what it consciously*

means to live a human existence.

The four allied fields continue along similar themes. *Existential psychology* emphasizes the importance of conscious intention, meaning, and awareness of the brevity of life. *Positive psychology* emphasizes creativity, spontaneity, human strengths, joy, courageousness and hope. *Mind/body psychology* emphasizes the importance of health, wellness and physical aspects of the person as related to his or her mental life. Finally *transpersonal psychology* emphasizes the importance of the spiritual or transcendent in human conscious and non-conscious behavior.

This so called “Third Force” of *humanistic* psychology (the first two “forces” were Freudian psychology and behaviorism) was created through the leadership of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers in the 1960s. It was meant to expand the understanding of human abilities into areas where psychology and education had been relatively silent, and thus extend the utility of those sciences in the modern world. The utility of this change in mindset has been tremendous. Education, medicine, athletic performance, psychotherapy, psychological coaching, stress studies, the hospice movement, and multicultural appreciation have all been influenced positively by this approach. In all the sciences, models such as chaos theory, the theory of self-organizing systems, and general systems theory help to handle the complexity of data derived from studies based upon a humanistic approach.

The Humanistic Approach Serves Our Current Time in History

The current fragmentation and rapid change in present society makes the humanistic approach particularly useful. When a society and historical era are settled and make use of traditional knowledge and processes, traditional authoritarian teaching styles work well for children and adults. They confirm a student's place in a steady social structure, a place that need only to be claimed when training is complete. In our current world societies and other human relationships are unstable and changing rapidly. Rapid change in this context means that the content that we need to teach or learn is never completely clear. The sense of a personal self also can be complex and contradictory. We yearn for connection with others and for some larger purpose for our lives but often fail to find clear responses that match the complexity of the times.

The humanistic approach to education accepts that the self is constantly transforming. It places the solid support of the child or adult within that child or adult, not in the shifting structures outside the person. In that way it gives power to the child or adult to create an optimal meaning and network of relationships in the ever-changing situation of modern life.

The humanistic approach can be understood using the metaphor of the *dance that creates the larger story*. Traditional education approaches are like teaching someone to dance a beautiful folk dance by having them read a book about it and memorize the names and order of the steps. "Modern" education lets the student dancer to practice the steps. Eventually the dancer may become a graceful and strong part of that traditional village circle dance, but not unless something more happens.

To participate happily in our modern version of village circle dances we need a *humanistic* education that provides the following three things. First we need to feel the personal embodied mastery of many steps that we have actually, physically tried, so that they are natural to us and we don't trip over our own feet while dancing.

Second we need to feel connected to other dancers in the circle, working together with a common purpose, so that we don't knock them down or confuse them. And third, we need to be in connection with the overall larger pattern the dance represents and care about what this dance is for, so that we can jointly create the joyful or pensive dance together. How the humanistic dance looks in a classroom setting was first described by Ferguson (1980).

And what about the creation of the larger story, mentioned above? The humanist writer Jean Houston (1987) talks about us, human beings, as creatures of myth and story. It is easy for us to see heroes and villains in our personal and social histories. When conflicts occur among nations or individuals, or when some traditional way of doing things does not work, we can "enlarge" our myth or story, using humanistic educational approaches. Using activities that engage minds, bodies, spirits and hearts - the whole person - humanistic teachers and students can create different stories and new moves for the dances they share.

Adult Learners and Humanistic Teaching

A very brief review of the work of some humanistic learning theorists who have wrestled with the characteristics of humanistic teaching and learning and *adult* cognition and representation and its impact on learning and teaching can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Teaching approaches should be suited to adult cognition and representation. Some humanistic principles taken from those theorists and some examples of their application in a classroom setting are given in Table 1.

Three Case Studies

Case One: A Rural Development Project

Teachers of adults using humanistic approaches have proven to be more successful than those using traditional approaches. Lynn Johnson (1991) studied the role of change agents teaching in international development projects. In that study two group leaders/teachers/facilitators were attempting to teach two very similar groups of illiterate rural women in Honduras how to work together in the group to raise and market pigs, something

they had not done before. For this project to work there needed to be a cognitive shift in values (toward valuing the entrepreneurial approach), beliefs (about gender roles), and information (about pig farming). One of the group leaders was judged to have Complex Postformal Thought skills (see Table 1); the second was judged to have no more than formal operations (scientific logic that Piaget found in adolescents). Johnson found that the group taught by the Postformal facilitator using the more humanistic approach learned more effectively and worked together more cooperatively to achieve their goal. The group taught by the leader without complex adult cognitive skills did not learn well and had a difficult time shifting values and beliefs. The latter group also fought with each other and with the leader.

Case Two: A Personal Humanistic College Teaching Experience

When I was near the end of PhD. program, I did not think of teaching in a humanistic way. But I did think teaching simply was good for passing information from the informed to the uninformed. This was how I had always experienced it.

One day a fellow graduate student and I decided to create a course that our department did not yet offer: Psychology of Aging. At that time there were no textbooks on "Psychology of Aging" available, this meant that we personally had to compile all relevant and meaningful materials and summarize it in a reasonable way before we presented it to students.

The idea was approved; the new course had begun. But, although the approval took considerable effort, the task of preparing for the class took even more. Being diligent, compulsive graduate students had paid off in our careers so far, so my colleague and I continued on that path. Articles and books and xerox copies began to take over my house. And, having found all this information, we seem to have unconsciously sworn to use every bit of it! We would be thorough! We would present students with the *whole, authoritative* picture of what was known about the psychology of aging!

I apologize to those of you readers with any classroom

teaching experience. I'm sure your anxiety is already beginning to mount. You know what is coming when professors, especially young and inexperienced ones, start to think like this, and it is not good for learning.

The first day of class finally came, and it led to the first week and then the first month. Each class day my colleague or I would arrive with reams of notes and articles and lecture rapidly. No bit of information would be ignored! Students wrote until their hands cramped and the board was full. But we lecturers felt great! We were doing a great traditional teaching job!

Perspective	Characteristics	Students
Postformal Complex Thought	Aware of the choice of one of logic among many true logics e.g., Newtonian or quantum physics rules apply? Aware that knowledge involves a necessary subjectivity.	Students realize that they are co-creators
Specific Thinking Operations:	Examples	
1. Multiple Causality	Why was my professor angry?	Students sees a web of events potentially leading to a situation
2. Multiple methods	I can detect tumors with PET scans, CT scans, MRIs.	Student realizes that there are many ways to reach the same goal.
3. Problem definition	Are we trying to study the water quality for environmental concerns or for economic needs?	Student learns to choose the parameters of a problem to be considered.
4. Pragmatism	There are six effective therapies for depression. Can I pick one that is "best" based on one logic?	Student can select among good solutions based on different logics.
5. Paradox	If I use antibiotics in cattle feed to produce cheap food (to keep people well-fed and healthy), they may get incurable infection from resistant organisms and die.	Students see the possible contradictory outcomes that result from the same event, because that event is imbedded in two dissimilar logics.
6. Process/Product shift	I can solve a problem by getting an answer for this instance ("47"), or by getting an algorithm that solves them all (potentially).	Student realizes that a "good solution" to a problem may be either a specific outcome or a process that works well in many problems of this type.
7. Metatheory shift	In theory, sexual abstinence before marriage is workable; in practice, it often is not.	Student can shift thinking from theoretical to practical implications.
8. Multiple solutions	Freeways can be built through cities, around cities, or under cities.	Student can see that more than one solution adequately meets the demands of a single problem.

Table 1. Sinnott's (1998) Humanistic Approaches in the Postformal Thought Theory of Adult Cognition

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Sternberg's Practical Intelligence and Practical Problem Solving; Baltes & Baltes' Optimization with Compensation

Perspective	Characteristics	Classroom Applications
Learning in adulthood is directed towards practical problem solving and the problem mastery of tacit knowledge (defined as the semi-automatic knowledge of how things work in the real world; e.g., "how office politics operators")	Selected cognitive abilities enable practical problem solving.	Stimulate underlying cognitive abilities. Practice solving real world in classroom.
Practical problem solving is the ability to solve problems in the real world	Postformal reasoning skills enable practical problem solving.	Stimulate growth of post-formal cognitive thought.
Optimize strong skills and expertise; Compensate for weak skills	Knowledge base: familiarity with a particular domain.	Teach within a domain.
(Baltes & Baltes, 1990) (Sternberg & Berg, 1992)		Use the tacit knowledge and practical problem solving skills adult students already possess.

Diane Lees's Collaborative Learning

Perspective	Characteristics	Classroom Applications
Adult knows think and learn via collaborative partnerships with one another.	Subjectivity is used as a learning tool. Multiple perspectives are taken. Contradiction is inherent in learning activities.	Use learning projects in which learners must create together and achieve consensus. Teaching should be: -Democratic -Dialogic -Ecologically valid
Lee, 1991, 1994)		

Meacham's Circles of Caring

Perspective	Characteristics	Classroom Applications
Learning expands the "circles of caring" (the extent of the group about which we care & with which we interact).	First we care about self, only; later, by learning about others, we begin to care about family, group, nation, our species, the world.	Teach about relationship. Teach the need for relationships. Teach and model the interactive nature of learning. Expand the circle of caring for the student
(Meacham & Boyd, 1994)		

Kramer & Bacelar's Wise Adult Learner; Labouvie-Vief's Emotional Regulation

Perspective	Characteristics	Classroom Applications
Adult learning is based on the development of wisdom, defined as non-fragmented learning.	Cross disciplinary boundaries to grasp patterns rather than isolated events. Reflect on relationships And the surrounding world.	Discuss all topics in an inter-disciplinary atmosphere. "True for whom?" Question absolute truth.
Adults learn emotional regulation.	Use dialectical synthesis. Interdependence of cognition and affect.	Consider general systems effects of information on all involved others. Discuss practical applications.
(Kramer & Bacelar, 1994)		Encourage experiential and intuitive knowledge.

Mezirow's Transformational Learning

Perspective	Characteristics	Classroom Applications
The adult learns to shift cognitive Contexts and frames of reference. Meaning is therefore transformed in many ways. This creates cognitive change	Elaboration on currently existing frames of reference. Learning of new frames of reference. Transformation of points of view. Transformation of habits of mind. Both subjective and objective reframing occur.	One goal in a classroom of adults is that adults become more liberated, autonomous, and socially responsible. Transformational learners seek to group with others, so offer them that opportunity. Give opportunities for reflective disclosure. Promote collaborative learning. Pemit and encourage critical reflection on normative assumptions. Reduce power relationships or hierarchical relationships.
(Mezirow & Associates, 2000)		

Kegan's Evolving Self

Perspective	Characteristics	Classroom Applications
Self-construction in the most important hidden curriculum of adult life	Learn to have a mind of your own; to be responsible for your feelings; to establish clear boundaries; Self reflective.	To teach adults, know their present epistemology and the one to which they are moving. E.g., "Socialized to be mind" moving toward "self-authoring mind."
Adults learn both information (what we know) and transformation (how we know). The latter epistemology transformation is a life-long cognitive process.	Learn to create "ideas about your idea", i.e., Select your truth.	Tailor the teaching approach to the epistemology.
Stages: 1. Self interest 2. Socialized mind (cognitive abstractions, traditionalism, mutual roles.) 3. Self-authoring mind (Cognitive abstraction systems; relationship-regulating roles.) 4. Self-transforming mind (cognitive-dialectical; postmodernism; interpenetration of self and others; self regulation.)	The individual grows cognitively through alternating between individuality and inclusion.	
(Kegan, 1982)		

Table 2. Selected Additional Humanistic Perspectives on Adult Cognitive Development

The discussion of “death and dying” came near the end of the course, naturally. I gave my usual information-packed lecture and the sound of note-taking instruments was intense. But toward the end of the class something very different happened, something that ultimately caused me to abandon my extensive notes and traditional style: an extremely capable student burst into tears and said she had to drop the class. As she ran from the room I asked her to meet me after the class. Luckily she did wait, and after class I talked with her further.

Unknown to me, during the current semester, this student had a more complex life. She had been the main caretaker of an older dying relative who had just died a few days before. She had not said anything about this significant experience when we lectured on care taking, or cognitive and physical changes. But, upon reflection, I realized that, after all, how could she say anything? We lecturers had never stopped talking! We were trapped in our own perspective and did not act as if she was an adult complex thinker and learner. Now she was pouring out the whole story of the relative's dying process and her experience of it. I knew what she was talking about. I had also been through some similar events and we could relate to each other on that basis. But the thing that impressed me the most (in my role as a professor) was the richness she brought to the material we were discussing that day in class. The studies in the literature had been interesting, but her real-life story was much more interesting and complete as a human experience. It made the conflicted feelings and the confusions of the real event of a death come to life in a way that a study report could not. “I just wish I could tell people what it's really like,” she said. And I knew she was right, for many reasons. I asked her if she wanted that chance to “tell people what it's really like” for a mind/body/heart/spirit to experience the loved one dying, and she revealed her willingness to do so.

In the next class, as usual, students came ready to hear a lecture and to take voluminous notes. Some of them had a distracted, abstract look on their faces, the look that said that their *real* worlds of life and emotions and relationships was far, far away from this room. But they

were for our surprise. We have not “cover” quite as many studies today. They found that the desks were now in a circle, not in rows since I had wanted the presenting student to feel less conspicuous than she might if she stood in front of the room. So one of them sitting in the desk was my student who was about to tell her story. We felt that we were going to have an unforgettable discussion, and many students were going to feel more like whole human beings.

In the end of the discussion students agreed that this was a class where they really learned a lot. They synthesized material and analyzed research and theory critically, as they considered the very real “case” of their fellow student and her dying relative. And, from later reports, some of these students remembered this material better than any other material of their college life. This is what can happen with a humanistic teaching approach.

Case Three: A Humanistic Process for Grading College Students - Creating a Grading System for the Semester

This is an activity for the first days of class. It's fun, and offers a heady taste of somewhat equal power to students who are accustomed to simply being in opposition to professors or submissive to them. While students make decisions about how many points their term paper should be worth, they get to know each other and begin to appreciate the fact that evaluation can be done in many different ways. Groups for this one should be small, so that even shy students or less articulate students can have their say.

You, the professor, decide the ground rules of the grading system (for example, what the major assignments are.) Students decide, by consensus, within your limits, how many points of the total obtainable points any given assignments are worth. It is important for you to have some non-negotiable guidelines written in your syllabus to set realistic limits to this discussion. You probably don't want a grading system that gives 100% of the possible points for attendance!

Postformal Thinking Operations most enhanced by this Method: Parameter setting, multiple solutions, multiple methods should be learned during this activity.

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Time Needed: 1-2, 50-minute class periods

Other Materials Needed: chalk board or other device for displaying the several grading systems

Preparations Needed for Professor: Know your own grading "non-negotiables"; describe the method to the students; explain why you are letting them help to create the system by which they are graded. Perhaps the hardest part is deciding how much latitude you feel comfortable about giving students in the decisions about points earned by assignments (that you alone will finally evaluate, as to correctness and quality.) In a writing course, for example, written assignments might be mandated to receive 50% or more points. Build these constraints into your syllabus.

Preparations needed for Class: Class should be in groups of 3-5 students (fewer than 3 cannot challenge each others' ideas; more than 5, a dominant student emerges and makes it harder for quiet students to have their say). Class needs to understand that this is a form of the Delphi system (named because the Greeks consulted an oracle at Delphi to obtain answers to difficult questions). It is a research tool used in long-distance decision making in which consensus must be reached. Successive iterations through the process lead to a consensus decision. For skeptical classes, they should know that this is not a trick, but a chance to exercise some freedom, for a change, and with it, some responsibility. For advanced classes, this exercise provides a chance for them to taste the role of professor.

End Product: A humanistic grading system agreed to by consensus, based on professor guidelines (expressed in syllabus), used during the remainder of the course as the professor evaluates quality and correctness of student work.

Another end product is a discussion for you and your students. Students should come to see that there is no definite authority or absolute value system that determines the quality of their work in class...at least, until they create one that then become the absolute system. They should notice that there are many possible solutions to the problem of creating a grading system, and that

there are many ways to get the same outcome.

Example of its use in Class

I use this method in an undergraduate class on the Psychology of Aging. After my preliminary remarks and preliminary syllabus scan, and after students introduce themselves to someone near them they have never met before ("because we're all in this together"), students are placed in groups of five, based on where they happen to be sitting. I ask them to look again at the syllabus and identify the requirements printed there. These usually include quizzes, a term paper, and a 10-minute presentation exploring how aging is portrayed in a movie or other cultural product. I ask them to think about anything else that they want to add to the "requirements" list, leading to a grade in this class. [At this point some winning and losing ideas are offered, and are fun for everyone, for example, "Bringing our grandmothers to class" (loser); "Picking a cross-cultural topic for the term paper" (winner); "interviewing our grandparents using standard questions" (winner); "participation" (winner).] [(variant; see below) I ask them to be scientist-observers of what is happening during this process.]

The groups now begin discussion in earnest, while I circulate among them, answering questions and making sure that all students have a chance to speak. Someone in each group is the reporter who will write the group's proposed system on the board for the class to view. When a group has created a point system that includes at least all the requirements stated in the syllabus, the reporter writes it on the board.

When all the systems are on the board open discussion begins. Discussion usually reveals conflicts in values and personal goals, conflicts which can be discussed later in the class in a general way in the context of attitudes toward aging.

Students are now ready to vote on the plans. For simplicity, in this example, here are three plans:

Group 1: Quizzes - 300 points; term paper - 100 points; presentation - 50 points; interview - 50 points.

Group 2: Quizzes - 150 points; term paper - 200 points; presentation - 100 points; interview - 50 points.

Group 3: Quizzes - 200 points; term paper - 200 points, presentation - 100 points.

Since there is no overall agreement, we need to discuss and vote on things according to our requirement. Starting with quizzes, pointing out that we must reach consensus and total 500 points, I ask for a class show of hands as to whether they can settle for 300 points for quizzes or at least 200 - 100? If no consensus can be reached, we go on to the next requirement, term paper, following the same system of voting. Eventually some systems are modified and consensus is obtained. I find that starting with the requirement that already has some consensus (like the term paper mentioned above) puts students in a consensus mindset and speed things up. If a stalemate is reached, and if discussion won't help, students go back to small groups to work out a whole new set of points. However they have been influenced by the earlier iterations and discussions, so views of what should happen begin to converge over time.

When a system is finally in place it may not look at all like the original ones:

Final system: Quizzes - 250 points; term paper - 150 points; presentation - 35 points; interview - 65 points.

Discussion may follow on the variant activities and on the consensus task. Discussion questions are given below.

General steps to use this method in any class

- Divide students into groups of 3-5 persons.
- Ask each group to reach consensus within the group about the number of points each required activity should earn, adding extra requirements as they see fit.
- Each group writes their plan on the board.
- General discussion of the plans.
- Vote on the points for each requirement, by requirement, e.g., "the term paper". Simple majority wins.
- If a stalemate occurs, go back to small groups to create a new plan. Revise postings on board.
- Continue until overall consensus is reached.
- If there is no further discussion, the final point system is

entered on each student's syllabus, and on yours, to be followed during the course of the semester.

Possible pitfalls/Problems

Students are not reaching consensus!

Solution: This fear has never become a reality in my 20 plus years of using this method. The solution is a simple one: tell them you are willing to wait as long as it takes for consensus to form. Then do so. It helps to explain that this difficult consensus building is the challenge of democracy, research teams, work groups, or of adulthood, so their practice here in class is very helpful in real life.

One student tries to dominate a group's discussion

Solution: Assign roles to members of the group. One person makes sure that everyone has a chance to contribute, say "Time up" when the speaker's stated period of time is over, and to pass the right to speak to the next group member. If this does not work, you can stay with that group and play the timekeeper role yourself.

The group plans are so widely divergent that no plan gets a majority

Solution: Send everyone back into discussion groups to create a brand new plan.

A month later students want to create a new grading system.

A student joins the class a week late and wants to have a say in the grading system

Solution: just say no, based on the ground rules.

Discussion Questions

Did you miss having an authority to decide for you? Why? Now that we have reached a decision, do you miss having an authority to decide? What has changed?

What "really" happened during this exercise? (used with the variant)

Could you solve this problem without setting ground rules beyond what is in the syllabus?

Is this data analyzable without setting parameters? (used with the variant)

Was there only one solution to this problem? Can you think

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of other situations in which there would be more than one solution to the problem?

We all concluded that the term paper (alter this to suit what happened in your class) should be worth the most points, but different groups got there using different plans. What were two different paths by which a group concluded that the term paper should be worth the most points?

Variations

Students might be asked to observe the most important things that happen during this activity. This data may be used for data analysis and transformed into a basis for future research. The qualitative data might also be used to demonstrate that the "lenses" of each researcher are different, and by extension, that different versions of "truth" and "reality" can emerge from intelligent viewers analyzing the same events.

Conclusion

In this case study some key ideas of the humanistic world views have been described. It is also argued that the fragmentation and rapid change in present society makes the humanistic approach particularly useful. The author offered the metaphor of the "dance that creates a larger story" as a metaphor for humanistic education in our era, useful all over the world, especially in teaching adults. A sample of how education would be changed if a humanistic approach were used is also proposed by the author. Finally three cases have been described showing the value and process of a humanistic educational approach in practical training in a rural development project and in a college setting.

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