Humanist Learning Theory

Dave Parsons

PIPD 3100
Introduction

In this paper, I will present the Humanist Learning Theory. I’ll discuss the key principles of this theory, what attracted me to this theory, the roles of the learners and the instructor, and I’ll finish with three examples of how this learning theory could be applied in the learning environment.

Learning Theory Highlights

“Humanism is a paradigm/philosophy/pedagogical approach that believes learning is viewed as a personal act to fulfill [sp] one’s potential.” (http://www.learning-theories.com/humanism.html) The key proponents of this learning theory are Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Malcolm Knowles.

Teaching using this theory is best done wherein the student is central and the learning is personalized. The educator’s role is best suited to that of a facilitator.

The Humanist Learning Theory strives to address the learner’s personal development. Learning is “…from the perspective of the human potential for growth.” (Learning in Adulthood, 2007, p. 281) The humanist’s standpoint is that we (humans) control our own destiny, we’re inherently good and have the best intentions to improve our world for ourselves and others, our paths and goals are our choice, and we possess unlimited potential for growth and development. To that end, the teacher should provide a positive learning environment in which the student is comfortable (emotionally) and strive to build the student’s self-esteem and confidence, the student’s desire to learn, and allow the student to learn at his/her own pace and direction. Experiential learning is one of the key aspects of this learning theory – incorporating the student’s own history and experience to build upon and guide their current learning.

Maslow considers the primary goal to be self-actualization. That is, the person’s desire to “…become all that he or she is capable of becoming.” (Learning in Adulthood, 2007, p.282) Maslow’s posits other goals, which include:

- The discovery of a vocation or destiny
- The knowledge or acquisition of a set of values
- The realization of life as precious
- The acquisition of peak experiences
- A sense of accomplishment
This is a partial list (Learning in Adulthood, 2007, p. 283) but for me, they are simply a detailed extension of the overall goal or idea, that of realizing our full potential.

Knowles concepts of andragogy appear rooted in humanistic theory and fit nicely with the ideologies presented by Maslow. For example, within the six assumptions of andragogy as proposed by Knowles, he indicated that as one matures, one moves from a dependent personality to that of a self-directing human being. Another assumption proposed that an adult’s experience is a rich resource for learning.

Finally, we see that Rogers hold similar beliefs of humanist learning. He sees both therapy and learning as a similar process. “In fact, his “client-centered therapy” is often equated with student-centered learning.” (Learning in Adulthood, 2007, p. 283) Rogers equates such learning with characteristics like personal involvement, self-initiated, pervasive, evaluation by the learner, and experiential learning become part of the total experience. Similar to Maslow and Knowles, we see the attributes of Rogers’ beliefs focus on personal characteristics and values of humans.

**Why I chose this learning theory**

In truth, I can relate to some aspects all of the learning theories presented in the text (Leaning in Adulthood, 2007) but I found that the Humanist Learning theory really resonated with me.

I’ve always considered myself to be a high self-monitor and have strived to seek continual personal improvement, but it’s only with time and maturity that I’ve recognized a broader picture of the way that I fit in with my friends and family, my community, and the larger scope of society. In line with the Humanist theory, I too believe that people have great capacity for growth and development, are basically good and carry the best intentions, and that we all draw upon our own history of experience to shape and guide our lives.

While researching the different learning theories, I attempted to visualize the theories from both the learner’s perspective and the instructor’s perspective. Having little practical instructor background but having a wealth of over 50 years’ experience in life, I was better able to relate with the learner’s perspective. The Humanistic Learning theory attributes a lot of value to experience. I feel that’s a valid way of viewing the theory because recognizing how I
incorporate learning into my life, may help me relate better to others when it comes time for me to facilitate their learning.

Role of the Learner

“The focus of learning is on the individual and self-development, with learners expected to assume primary responsibility for their own learning.” (Caffarella, 1993, p.284) This is in keeping with the Humanistic Learning theory’s perspective that the learner must be self-directed. The learner will be an active participant in his/her education, taking responsibility for his/her own learning, even participating in the planning, execution, and evaluation of their own learning.

Most of the documentation (that I could find) regarding Humanistic Learning, indicates that one of the main attributes of this theory is that the learner has the role of being self-directed. While I can appreciate that is a generally desirable trait, I question if this holds true. Some adults cannot or will not perform well as self-directors but that shouldn’t limit their ability to partake in a humanistic-type of learning environment. I see no reason that people couldn’t benefit and attain personal growth within this learning theory even if the learning environment was of a directed nature. Much like my earlier observation, in which I stated that I could identify with something within each of the learning theories, I think that the characteristics or attributes of either the learner or the instructor can only be generalities: some characteristics will be situational and others internal.

Role of the Instructor

The role of the instructor begins as a facilitator or guide. The instructor will help the learner to develop and grow as a person, but the main expectation is that the learner is primarily responsible for their own learning. While many of the proponents of the Humanistic Learning theory feel that the learner will ideally be self-directed, I feel that an environment using a directed style wouldn’t prevent the learner from achieving the same growth.

Self-actualization is generally accepted as the motivating force that drives people to realize their full potential, to be a better person and be a contributing member of society, to seek knowledge and enlightenment, etc. “For Maslow self-
actualization is the goal of learning, and educators should strive to bring this about” (Learning in Adulthood, 2007, p. 282)

When the instructor is acting as a guide, the learner has greater control over his/her learning and carries a greater responsibility for their own success. That type of learning may work well for students with high motivation, high interest levels, and the ability to self-direct/self-actualize, but some students may require a more directed learning style. These students may need the structure of a ready-designed, lock-step type of program. So despite the generally accepted concept of the role of the instructor as a guide or facilitator, the situation or the individual may dictate a more formalized environment. Additionally, some adult learners may find the directed approach more comfortable due to traditional expectations about the learning process.

Three Classroom Examples

It was difficult to find three examples of the Humanistic Learning theory being used in a classroom environment. The Humanistic Learning theory involves the student taking responsibility and control for a significant amount of the learning while traditional instruction and learning tends to occur in a more structured, linear manner. I suspect real-world application of humanistic learning may be somewhat limited. In my examples, I will discuss learning from a fitness coach, learning from an occupational therapist, and lastly, the University of Idaho course offering that teaches entrepreneurial and management skills.

Example 1 – Fitness Center Instruction

My first example uses the local fitness facility as a classroom. It can be a truly intimidating, daunting experience for an adult entering into an exercise program for the first time. The huge array of equipment available in modern facilities combined with the (seemingly) infinite range of exercises often leaves new entrants into the exercise world confused and uncertain. In this situation, adults often enlist the aid of a personal trainer or instructor.

In the beginning of the training, the instructor must tailor a workout program specific to this individual. A program that works for one person often looks significantly different than that for another person. The instructor must work very closely with the individual to determine that individual’s goals and needs, he must assess the current health and
capability of the individual, and finally, he must develop a workout program specific to this individual. The instructor will then lead the client through the various aspects of the program, from diet to a range of exercises to suit this person.

However, this is often just the starting point. The main goal for the instructor is to supply information to the individual that outlines typical workout programs, but the instructor is also supplying tools to the client to build upon the initial program. The client will often remain with the instructor for only a short period (a handful of private lessons over a period of a few weeks) but the instructor needs to impart a more complete understanding of the various exercises available and the permutations of a balanced diet so that the client is able to advance and continuously adapt his workout program into the future, without the instructor’s guidance.

The student is given the guidance and tools necessary to begin a successful program, but it’s the student that will be responsible for continuing modification of the program, setting expectations, monitoring and evaluating results and adapting. The instructor was merely the starting point for the student, starting the student off on the right foot. In this scenario, the instructor is a guide and the student becomes very self-directed.

**Example 2 – Parenting Classes**

If any teachings exemplify the humanistic ideals, it’s hard to think of one that ascribes to those ideals more than that of being a parent, guiding your child into adulthood. Simply being a parent will typically call all of the tenets of humanistic learning into play. The parent is the guiding force for the child, seeking to expand the child’s perspective, impart knowledge, build self-esteem and awareness, etc. Although the parent/child relationship is very much an instructor/student relationship, it’s typically an informal process with most learning acquired from discussion and example. Many parents seek guidance for parenthood, hoping to improve their chances of raising a healthy, happy child that will ultimately become a positive, contributing member of society. Enter the parenting class.

Similar to being a parent, teaching an adult to be a (better) parent also embodies the tenets and ideals of humanistic learning. For example, there is a woman, Teresa Bouchard, in Kelowna, BC, that offers classes on parenting ([www.kelownaparenting.com](http://www.kelownaparenting.com)). On the home page of this site, she states: “*Empower Children to Think for Themselves, Develop Self-Discipline, Self-Confidence and be Resilient. Build Healthy Relationships Based on Mutual Respect.*
Discover Practical, Positive and Effective Discipline Techniques. Through workshops, courses and personalized coaching, improve your relationships with children and support them in developing of the qualities, characteristics and life-skills they need to be successful at home, in childcare, at school and in life.

She also offers the quote: "There is no single effort made radical in its potential for saving the world than a transformation of the way we raise our children." - Marianne Williamson. I think it’s clear that Teresa’s classes represent the ideals of humanistic learning.

Teresa offers an eight week coaching course called “Raising respectful, resourceful, and responsible children”, but for people that can’t commit to eight weeks, they have the option of personalized coaching offering flexible hours, days, and topics – including topics of the parent’s own choosing.

Teresa also offers behavioral consulting. She states on her site: “I can share with you effective tools, tips, and techniques that promote positive behavior choices, invite cooperation, support mutual respect, maintain boundaries, teach problem-solving and encourage self-motivation. By empowering you, I give you the gift of empowering your child. You are a parent for life and my goal is to support you on your journey and help you maintain a healthy, loving relationship with your child by giving you the tools, strategies and confidence that you can be the parent you want to be and ultimately create the family life you really want.”

Finally, Teresa offers a number of workshops to support the coaching and consulting. Some of the workshops include: Supporting Student Learning, Family and Team Building, Communication, Discipline, Encouragement, and Social Emotional Behavioral Development. Again, Teresa’s objectives, methods, and the delivery all appear to reflect the tenets of humanistic learning.

Example 3 – Teaching Entrepreneurial and Management Skills to Extension Audiences

My final example of a humanistic learning environment is based on the University of Idaho offering a course to business entrepreneurs and business managers (http://www.joe.org/joe/2005april/tt6.php). This program is offered both on campus and off campus. The course teaches skills for manager-entrepreneurs to successfully startup and run a business.
Although it may be possible to create a business plan according to some sort of industry-typical formula, teaching a student in entrepreneurial and management skills would be crafted to suit each individual. The basics for approaching this type of learning may be a more directed-type of instruction but because each business and each student would be unique, the guidance to completion would be very individual. Indeed, much of the planning and execution would be the student’s responsibility. To be successful in any entrepreneurial enterprise would require ongoing planning, learning, flexibility, and adaptation on the learner’s part.

In the site’s outline of what the course offers and how it’s delivered, they specify that often adult students haven’t been in a classroom for quite some time. They also recognize that some adult learners may not have even graduated from high school. Therefore, they make note of the importance of the learning environment. “Class format and classroom atmosphere can be used effectively to facilitate student engagement with subject matter.” Also, “It is imperative that the instructor develops an atmosphere where all students are comfortable and even those who did not enjoy school are willing to participate.”

The delivery of this course to the student is primarily discussion, hands-on activities, and in-class instruction from the instructor and other students. The course delivery also relies heavily on guest speakers – both professionals experienced in planning, launching, and running a business, as well as other entrepreneurs who have already gone through the process.

**Summary**

The Humanistic Learning Theory resonated with me more so than the other theories likely because I can relate to most of the ideologies that guide this theory. In recent years, I’ve recognized the how great the potential is for me to impact other people’s lives and conversely, the potential for others to impact my life. I’ve been fortunate to have a mentor that has helped me see myself, others, and circumstances from different perspectives and feel privileged to have been given a broader way of viewing the world and society in a new light.
This learning theory seems the most altruistic, where the person comes before the topic. Some of the goals of the Humanistic Learning theory are to assist people to reach their full potential, grow as an individual, guide the student rather than direct, and emphasize freedom and responsibility.

I supplied three very different classroom examples that each typifies the tenets of the Humanistic Learning theory. I believe that, in a traditional classroom environment, practical application of this learning theory may be difficult to implement on its own, but at the least, instructors should attempt to include the ideals whenever possible. It’s more a matter of long-term growth than the learning of a single topic of study.

References


