# Students' perceptions on experiential learning in a person-centered atmosphere

**David Haselberger, Renate Motschnig**

University of Vienna (Austria), Computer Science Didactics and
Learning Research Center

A careful design and delivery of courses for teacher candidates is particularly
important for having a positive influence on their teaching behaviour. This
is because it is the lived learning experience that they tend to assimilate
and pass on to pupils. In order to find out how students, primarily teacher
candidates, perceive person-centered, technology enhanced courses, we
conducted semi-structured interviews and analysed them by means of a
qualitative content analysis. The results indicate that students get in contact
with others more easily in a person-centered setting and that learning through
personal experience is sustained.

## 1 Introduction

Nearly half a century ago, Carl Rogers, one of the best known American psychologists and initiator of a non-directive approach to psychotherapy, shared a view on learning and classroom interaction that focused on the relationships between persons in a learning situation as being most crucial for the effectiveness of their learning experience (Rogers, 1957) in: (Rogers, 1989, p. 305).

In a climate, where personally meaningful problems can be explored without threat, self-initiated, significant, experiential, 'gut-level' learning takes place (Rogers, 1983, p. 121).

To enable learning experiences where students can be actively involved, are personally engaged, the design of a suitable course setting seems to be substantial.

Person-centered, technology-enhanced learning (PCeL) combines the person-centered approach to learning as stated by Carl Rogers with elements of modern technology (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005). PCeL aims to provide a climate for significant, whole person learning that addresses learners' intellect, social skills, personality and feelings within the confines of conventional curricular structures (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005), (Motschnig *et al.*, 2010). Technology is hereby utilized as aid and tool to facilitate and to increase the efficiency of experiential learning.

To get an idea of the effects of the experiences students gain in person-centered learning situations, we conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen students, primarily teacher candidates. The interviews were further explored by means of qualitative content analysis to support the elaboration of a person-centered programme for teacher candidates in a technology enhanced context at the university.

The results of the study give information about students´ perceived influence of experiences in person-centered learning situations on their own learning and personal development. They further give insight into students´ viewpoints concerning blended learning settings as well as person-centered, experiential learning at the university.

Thus, the findings can be seen as valuable for the design of learning situations that enable experiential learning, present and online, and the development of facilitative competencies of educators in learning groups.

In the next section, we depict characteristics of person-centered learning. In section 3 we give insight in the design and implementation of the study concerning students´ perspectives. After that, we present and interpret results related to experiential learning. The conclusion summarizes the findings and points to further research.

## 2 PCeL - Person-centered technology enhanced learning: Theory and Practice

From a person-centered perspective, learning that is personally meaningful includes feelings and social skills besides intellect. It «*combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning (Rogers, 1983, p. 20).*» It implies the whole spectrum of organismic experiences in order to develop and expand. Thus, such learning tends to make a difference in perceptions and behaviour of the learner (Barrett-Lennard, 1998/2007, p. 187), (Rogers, 1983, p. 20).

Effective, experiential learning is self-initiated. Major aspects of such learning are that students deal with authentic problems they are curious about, available resources are used flexibly to deepen insight, multiple viewpoints are taken, facts are evaluated from different angles against reality to eventually find creative, tentative solutions in the process of self-appropriation (Rogers, 1957) in: (Rogers, 1989, p. 314).

Approaching areas of interest in a variety of experiential and scientific ways, the learner not only obtains knowledge of the focused subject but also of him/herself organizing, constructing different facets of it as they appear in awareness and so finds ways to act upon stimuli from the environment, others and him/herself to resolve puzzling phenomena (Cornelius-White, 2007a), (Rogers, 1983, p. 126).

The persistency of a climate of experiential learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities. As teachers act upon the hypothesis that students can be trusted to develop their own potentiality, they tend to see themselves more as facilitators of learning than in the role of expert-instructors. They are real in contact with students, themselves without a facade in the learning situation. They passionately try to understand empathically students' joys and fears and they feel and express unconditional positive regard towards students as individuals that deserve to be respected. If those attitudes are perceived by learners, change and personal growth can happen (Rogers, 1983, p. 121-126), (Rogers, 1959).

There is vast research evidence that a person-centered classroom atmosphere supports deep, significant learning. Extensive studies in the fields of the effectiveness of teacher-student relationships and classroom climate were conducted by Reinhard and Anne-Marie Tausch in Germany as well as David Aspy and Flora Roebuck in America (Rogers, 1983, p. 195-224). In 2008, Jeffrey Cornelius-White released a meta-analysis of 119 studies from the year 1948 to 2004 conducted in the USA, Germany, Austria, Brazil, England and the Philippines showing that person-centered attitudes of teachers in learning situations are effective considering the cognitive, behavioural and affective

development of learners. Person-centered education is associated with increases in student participation/initiation, satisfaction, motivation to learn, self-esteem, social connections and skills as well as students´ critical and creative thinking (Cornelius-White, 2007b).

## 3 Students´ perspective

In order to find out about students´ views of supportive learning situations, the impact of the lived, experiential dimension and proper use of e-Learning elements, the first author conducted interviews with students and explored the transcribed material by means of qualitative content analysis. In this section, we give insight in the study-design and the process of inquiry. After that, we interpret results of the content analysis specifically addressing students´ experiences of person-centered learning. The findings are further discussed in the context of teacher training at universities and the arrangement of blended learning settings enabling experiential learning.

### 3.1 Study design

The procedure in the study is guided by Philipp Mayring's approach of qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is a systematic, methodological controlled, rule-guided method for the exploration of communication (Mayring, 2008, p. 12/13/56; Mayring, 2000).

The central instrument of qualitative content analysis are categories representing aspects of text interpretation following the research question. Categories are developed and rephrased within the process of analysis (Mayring, 2000. As this method is systematic and rule-guided, it may support objectivity, validity and reliability of the explorative results. «*The procedure has the pretension to be inter-subjectively comprehensible, to compare the results with other studies in the sense of triangulation and to carry out checks for reliability (Mayring, 2000, p. 3)*».

In the next passages we summarize the steps taken in the process of our study. These follow a structural model as proposed by Mayring. An extensive report of the complete study can be found in (Haselberger, 2010).

### 3.2 Outline of process stages

The foundation for this analysis is formed by 13 interviews with students of the University of Vienna who gathered experience in person-centered learning settings. Interviewees were searched by sending a formal invitation via eMail to students who participated in a course of person-centered communication.

Students could choose to take part in a face-to-face interview or to return a

filled out questionnaire. The questions in the questionnaire establish the guideline for the face-to-face interviews.

11 students took part in a problem-centered interview from May to July, 2009, two students returned a filled out questionnaire. See table 1 for more information about interview participants. In problem-centered interviews, as outlined by Andreas Witzel, interviewees can express themselves freely to a previously analyzed subject, without having to stick to standardized answers (Witzel, 1985, p. 227-255).

TABLE 1
Interview Participants

| Interview | m/f | Age | Field of Study |
|-----------|-----|-----|----------------|
| A | m | 23 | Computer Science/Psicology and Phiosophy Teacher Training |
| B | m | 26 | Computer Science Teacher Training |
| C | m | 23 | Bac. Management in Computer Science |
| D | m | 45 | Bac. Management in Computer Science |
| E | m | 24 | Computer Science/Physics Teacher Training |
| F | m | 23 | Bac. Management in Computer Science |
| G | m | | Bac. Management in Computer Science |
| H | m | 33 | Bac. Management in Computer Science |
| I | m | | |
| J | m | 21 | Bac. Management in Computer Science |
| K | f | 27 | Ma. Business Informatics |
| L | f | | |
| M | m | 23 | Computer Science/Physics Teacher Training |

The transcribed interview-texts combined with the answers students gave in the questionnaires comprise a total of 121479 words. The digital audio recordings of the interviews interviewees approved of beforehand were transcribed. The texts were sent to the interviewees via email for validation and correction.

## Theoretically informed differentiation of questions to be answered

In the first cluster of questions
- effects of experiences made in a learning atmosphere characterized by realness, acceptance and empathic understanding on the side of the facilitator on personal development in various fields of learning are

inspected
- components of the learning climate that were felt to be important or necessary for personal growth are gathered and
- personal experiences are evaluated with regard to the own (future) occupation as teacher as well as in comparison to other courses at the university.

This cluster was derived by the review of literature concerning effects of person-centered education (Rogers, 1983, p. 195-224; Cornelius-White, 2007b).

The second cluster deals with the support of a facilitative learning climate by means of information and communication technology (ICT). In person-centered, technology-enhanced learning, ICT is used to support the organization and the evaluation of courses oriented toward the person-centered approach (Derntl, 2005; Motschnig-Pitrik & Mallich, 2002; Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005).

In the third cluster the main focus is set on the design and implementation of courses oriented toward the person-centered approach in teacher training programs at universities and in the context of school settings.

## 3.3 Results

We decided to approach the data collected in the interviews with a structuring content analysis. The categorization of a text portion was carried out in three steps: A category was defined, anchor examples were collected in the material and coding rules were deployed to establish clear classifications.

Before coding all interviews, we tested the initial system of categories on one interview to find out if definitions were appropriate and if anchor examples could be found. We revised it accordingly.

In the content analysis, anchor examples of categories in the interviews were quantified and frequencies of assignments to categories computed.

Categories covering students´ experiences and views were further grouped into three clusters, namely:
- «*Perceived personal development through experiential learning*»,
- «*Motivation and Experiential Learning*», consisting of the categories «*Experiences with co-decisions on learning activities*», «*Determining factors for personal engagement in a person-centered setting in the context of a course at the university*» and «*Opportunities to deepen experiential learning*» and
- «*Relevance of person-centered courses in comparison to other courses*» consisting of the category «*Relevance of courses designed oriented toward the person-centered approach in comparison to other courses*

*at the university*».

## 3.4 Interpretation

In the following, the results of the analysis are summarized and interpreted. Qualitative and quantitative statements are integrated to complement each other such as to communicate more meaning than each one alone.

*Perceived personal development through experiential learning*

TABLE 2

Clusters of students´ statements in the category "Perceived personal development through experiential learning" (Extract showing clusters with statements from 4 or more students)

| Paraphrase | Count (Total = 13) | In % |
|---|---|---|
| Encounter with others | 8 | 62 |
| Focus on group dynamics | 7 | 54 |
| Self knowledge | 7 | 54 |
| Self awareness | 5 | 38 |
| Empathy | 5 | 38 |
| PCA as theory of intuitive (pre-)knowledge | 5 | 38 |
| Acceptance | 4 | 31 |

As depicted in table 2, most interviewees responded that it was a significant experience for them to get to know themselves better in encounter with others. Being genuinely open in sharing with others without having to hide was described as fostering self-assurance, self-confidence. Students reported that experiences in a person-centered atmosphere helped them to feel more relaxed in various situations. Moreover, barriers in language could be easier overcome in a climate of unconditional positive regard.

Person-centered communication was seen as equipment to step back and explore what is happening at the moment, to become more aware of factual and emotional levels of communication.

Students described as a consequence of the encounter with others in a person-centered setting that getting in contact with other people came more naturally.

To share experiences with other students, to communicate «*without prejudice*» were important aspects for personal development. Realness, unconditional positive regard and empathy were described as the basis of helpful, constructive communication. A metaphor an interviewee used was that these conditions are like bricks whereas the house built with them always looks different. «*I try*

*to understand, to be empathic. I try to empathize, to understand the situation of the other, the reality of the other. It is not always 100%, but I try and this is the way. It is a life-long challenge, I guess,*» a student remarked. Sharing, collecting and capturing different, culturally diverse, views was characterized as opening up new perspectives.

Interviewees indicated that what was taken along from person-centered settings was related to personal experiences and to how they viewed themselves. Some perceived the person-centered approach as a theory of intuitive knowledge, intuitive action (Ikemi, 2011).

## Motivation and Experiential Learning

«*Openness of participants and openness of the course in total, that it is not some sort of lecture, but really a course where you should, can, even must talk yourself.*»

TABLE 3

Clusters of students´ statements in the category "Determining factors for personal engagement in a person-centered setting in the context of a course at the university" (Extract showing clusters with statements from 4 or more students)

| Paraphrase | Count (Total = 13) | In % |
|---|---|---|
| Facilitator | 8 | 62 |
| Openness | 6 | 46 |
| Thematic area | 6 | 46 |
| Not constrained | 5 | 38 |
| Listening | 4 | 31 |

Table 3 shows that openness was mentioned as important factor for personal engagement in courses. An open structure of a course allows people to decide for themselves in what ways they participate. To be heard, taken serious, not to be ignored, that interest is shown in what is said, that personal views are accepted and mutual trust were perceived as critical for personal engagement in learning groups. A student elucidates: «*First, it was very important for me, that we listened to one another, so not, like, interrupting while the other is not yet finished; no, but, that the other could finish speaking, and then, hands were raised or someone else started talking. A certain culture of conversation was perpetuated, this was very important for me; and further, well, that the climate simply fit*».

The most important factor for motivation in person-centered learning settings seems to be the facilitator. It was seen as supportive, when the facilitator directly spoke to persons, initiated dialogue. Interviewees described a facilitator

as someone who can quickly overlook situations, an experienced companion who has a mental map of the process, who appreciates the exchange of diverse perspectives. Students found it especially important to perceive that the facilitator took the contents he or she shares in a course to heart, that he/she lived them.

Interviewees specified that it was dependent on the current topic whether they participated actively. If a thematic area was regarded personally relevant, students were more willed to share their own experiences and ideas. The vast majority of interviewees liked to have the opportunity to co-decide on course contents. Some emphasized that there was room for interests and expectations of students in person-centered settings.

TABLE 4

Clusters of students´ statements in the category "Experiences with co-decisions on learning activities" (Extract showing clusters with statements from 4 or more students)

| Paraphrase | Count (Total = 13) | In % |
|---|---|---|
| Co-deciding is seen positively | 9 | 69 |
| Self-reliance | 4 | 31 |

Interviewees perceived decision processes in teams as needing time. This was ascribed to the new experience of co-deciding that many students were not accustomed to. An interviewee communicates: «*At times, it was very difficult, because people were not used to this. Students are used to be consumers, but there it was different, there was self-determination and this was new to some, it was relatively new to myself, to sort of start talking when I have something to share, that I can say: 'This bothers me now', or 'I want to discuss this now.' And this is why I found it tough sometimes. Because it was something new, in my view*».

Potentials to deepen experiential learning were seen in:
• seeking group discussion and dialogue,
• elaborating theory online,
• more openness,
• more feedback,
• more constructive critique and
• including phases of self-regulated learning.

*Relevance of person-centered courses in comparison to other courses*
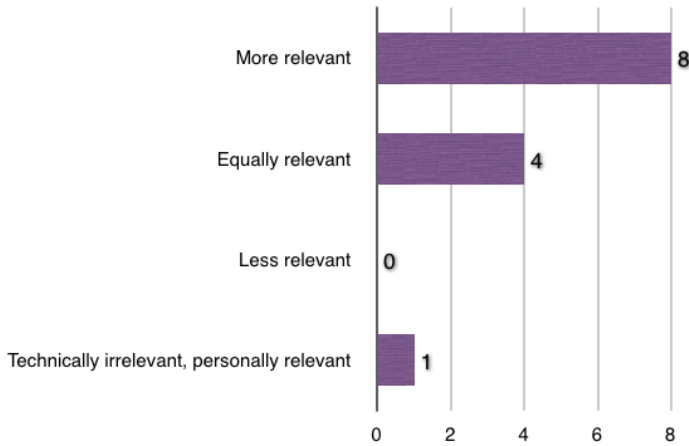


Fig. 1 - Relevance of courses designed oriented toward the person-centered approach in comparison to other courses at the university

As illustrated in figure 1, about 62% of the respondents valued a learning setting oriented toward the person-centered approach more than usual courses for their personal development. Person-centered courses were perceived as more universal than other courses as issues didn´t just concern the field of study, but life beyond that. Due to the opportunity of holistic experiencing, self-reflection and development of personal skills, learning in person-centered settings was described as sustained.

About 31% of the interviewees experienced such learning settings equally relevant as other course offers at the university. Some expressed that when it comes to expert knowledge, the relevance of such courses is not that big.

An interviewee reflects critically: «*If it is a subject, a certain subject where I learn 'You should do it like this or like that', where I learn something about my profession, the relevance maybe is not that high. If someone sees this subject as his or her profession... then it is very important. In now thinking, I realize, it maybe is important, maybe not as important as other, more specific subjects, but it has, about 30% to 40% in comparison to specific subjects, where you need to know something to proceed or to be able to work in a profession. So, I guess, it is quite important, things like this*».

Furthermore, interviewees expressed a wish for more courses that are designed for interactivity, where group conversations take place and students can exchange their experiences with others.

### 3.5 Discussion

The interpretation of the analysis was guided by the three main clusters outlined and elaborated with a general focus on what can we learn from the perceptions of students relating to the design of blended learning courses enabling personal expansion and development at the university, especially in teacher training.

The findings of the study broadly affirm the efforts of Tausch & Tausch (1998), Aspy (1972), Aspy and Roebuck (Rogers, 1983, p. 195-224) as well as Cornelius-White (2007b). New insights were gained about person-centered learning in blended-learning environments, the use of e-Learning elements in experiential learning settings and pivotal factors of a climate supporting learning through experience.

If several researchers coded the text sources, reliability could have been increased.

### Conclusion

This excerpt from a detailed study on students' perceptions on person-centered technology enhanced learning (Haselberger, 2010) focused on issues connected to the experiential nature of such learning. The qualitative content analysis from extensive interviews indicates that - in experiential learning - it was not the subject specific content that came in the first place, but something more sustainable, more general, more connected to learners as whole persons standing in life. In particular, students reported to have been challenged to participate actively, voice their opinions and build cooperative relationships. Some noted an increase in their self-confidence. Further research will focus on yet longer term effects of experiential learning, in particular on graduate's perceptions in their work context and on person-centered teams.

### Acknowledgements

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