Facilitating Person-Centered Communication with international students: Case study focusing on the students' voice

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Abstract: Increasing globalization requires us to be in contact with and understand people from diverse origins and cultures. In order to meet this challenge, a blended learning course on "Person-Centered Communication" has been designed to improve interpersonal communication within and across nations and to prepare academics for an international workplace. The course aims at providing experiential learning through person- and group-centered student-teacher interaction and heavily relies on the inclusion of both students and online media to enrich the active learning process. This contribution provides a case study of the course. It describes the course along with its objectives and emphasizes the significant, experiential learning of students from three continents, as perceived and expressed by the students in their own words.

Introduction

Communication in general, and intercultural communication in particular, appear to be key competences 8not only) of our century (O'Hara and Leicester, 2012; Rogers, 1980). Moreover, there is by now vast agreement among educators and policy makers that learning needs to address learners at all three levels: their intellect, skills and attitudes (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2004; Nykl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005; MxCombs, 2013). Complementarily, EU strategies encourage the integration of technology into educational processes. Learning at three levels and technology enhanced settings open up a wide spectrum of opportunities and challenges in making learning more meaningful, enjoyable, sustainable, and, in general, effective. However, the added value of including all three levels does not come for free. To be effective, it requires facilitators with both subject specific and (inter)personal competencies (Aspy & Roebuck, 1976; Motschnig-Pitrik, 2006; Motschnig-Pitrik & Mallich, 2004; Rogers, 1983). The brand person-centered, experiential learning and web2.0-technology enhancement that was practiced in the course described in this article has been named Person-Centered, technology enhanced Learning, or short: PCeL. It has been developed by the author and her team at the University of Vienna since the turn of the millennium (Motschnig-Pitrik & Holzinger, 2002; Motschnig-Pitrik, 2006). Research on PCeL has been published by the author and her group since 2001 in over 150 international, peer reviewed articles. For an overview of research results see (Motschnig-Pitrik and Standl, 2013).

Our approach to technology enhanced learning, i.e. combined face-to-face and online learning, builds upon humanistic educational principles as realized in the Person-Centered Approach (PCA) by Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1961, 1983). In Rogers's own words (Rogers, 1983, p. 20): "*Significant 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...*" Thus, Person-Centered learning is a personally significant kind of learning that integrates new elements, knowledge, or insights to the current repertoire of the learner's own resources such that he or she moves to an advanced constellation of meaning and resourcefulness (Barrett-Lennard, 1998). It can be characterized by active participation of students, a climate of trust provided by the facilitator, building upon authentic problems, and raising the awareness of meaningful ways of inquiry (Rogers, 1983). Research in the PCA has proved (Aspy, 1972; Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010; Cornelius-White et al., 2004) that students achieve superior results along with higher self-confidence, creativity, openness to experience, and respect, if they learn in a climate in which the facilitator (instructor, teacher, etc.) holds three core attitudinal conditions and if the learners perceive them, at least to some degree. The core conditions are realness, genuineness, or congruence of the facilitator; acceptance or respect towards the student; and empathic understanding of students at all levels, including their feelings, meanings, ideas, borders, fears, wishes, etc. The way in which these core conditions can be expressed in technology enhanced learning situations in general is discussed in more detail in (Motschnig-Pitrik & Mallich, 2004), the online learning environment is described in (Derntl & Mangler, 2004; Mangler & Derntl, 2004).

In the following, we describe the design and facts of the course on person centered communication that has been offered at the Faculty of Informatics at the Masaryk University in Brno/CZ since 2005. Subsequently, excerpt from students' online reactions and their online self-evaluation will be cited to illustrate the kind of significant learning that had happened as a result of the course. This is intended to illustrate the course outcome that typically extends "learning" to cover also relational issues such as community building and understanding across cultures (Barrett-Lennard, 2005; 2013). An experience-based conclusion and outlook on further research conclude the paper. In general, the paper aims to illustrate and to reflect the effects of including all levels of "learning", complemented with the use of new media in academic settings, in order to allow educators to draw their own "images" and orientations regarding the appropriateness of person centered education to meet the challenges of today's global society and economy.

Course design and goals of "Person-Centered Communication"

The course described and studied in this article has been designed by the author, essentially complementing Person Centered Education (Rogers, 1983) with online elements.. The course design has been adapted over 8 years and includes structured face-to-face workshops and person centered encounter groups (Rogers, 1070) that are accompanied by students' online reactions. The course is held in 3 blocks, each lasting 1.5 days or 13 academic hours (a 45 minutes). The upper limit on attendance is about 20 students. At the end, students are asked to submit a brief seminar thesis that aims to integrate theoretical aspects with students' personal experience in the course and in applying person-centered communication in whatever context

of their lives. Also, as will be described below, students evaluate themselves in the form of written statements.

For the sake of transparently specifying learning goals, we decompose significant, whole-person learning into three layers (Nykl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005). The level of intellect or intellectual knowledge, the level of (social) skills, and the level of attitudes, dispositions, feelings, intuitions. Accordingly, I formulated learning goals at each level. Then face-to-face and online learning activities were designed such that each level was addressed. The following illustrates the course goals assigned to each of the three levels, respectively:

Level of knowledge: Knowledge about:

- The 3 Rogers variables: Congruence, acceptance and empathic understanding
- Active listening
- Developmental tendency in the Person Centered Approach
- Actualizing tendency, self-structure and experience
- Significant learning
- Encounter groups: Process stages, effects, community building

Level of skills: Improvement of skills regarding

- Ad hoc communication and online communication
- Speaking in a group
- Active listening
- Short ad hoc presentations
- Teamwork
- Dialogue
- Reflection and feedback

Level of personality and attitudes or dispositions: Development towards:

- Inner flexibility
- Transparent communication as a result from increased congruence between self and experience
- More expressive and effective communication
- Higher acceptance of self and others, dealing with ambiguity,
- Better understanding of self and others, within and across cultures
- Dealing with problems in everyday life more constructively

These goals were complemented by more specific personal goals of participants, collected in the very beginning of the course, like overcoming the fear of speaking to a group, or expressing one's thoughts concisely. When introducing themselves, participants were kindly asked to voice their expectations and fears regarding the course. Written reaction sheets were posted to the online course space after each workshop block and at the end of the course. Students could read the reaction of their peers and the facilitator gave a brief review of selected reactions at the beginning of each block.

The first course day was spent with getting to know one another and elaborating and discussing expectations and resources rather than lecturing. For example, students were asked to form teams of about 4 – 5 persons and prepare a flipchart on features of good listening or, alternatively, problems that can occur while listening. The proposed activities were targeted at building knowledge about communication by means of elaborating material to be further studied and applied in the team's projects. Furthermore, the early course blocks served to practice concrete communication situations, like saying "no" or expressing anger, and thereby to heighten the sensitivity of students regarding relationship issues and issues lying at the level of feelings. For example, students engaged in an exercise on active listening and afterwards reflected their experience. Also the consequences of online media on reducing essential assets of communication, possible workarounds, and their potentials and limitation were thoroughly addressed, such that students could continue observing the different modes while meeting online and/or face-to-face to work on their projects. In sum, the course units, team projects and problem-elaboration contributed primarily, although not exclusively, to learning at the levels of knowledge and skills.

Person Centered encounter group session (Rogers, 1970) dominated the second and third block. They were facilitated whenever the group arrived at a point where free sharing of feelings, meanings and thought of participants seemed appropriate to the facilitator. These sessions aimed to develop, in the first place, the level of feelings, attitudes, and dispositions. The lack of structure in such sessions required participants to co-construct meaning by relying solely on their personal resources and mutual relationships. In person centered encounter groups, a primary "task" of the facilitator is to provide an open, respectful and understanding atmosphere in which participants and the whole group can move forward in a constructive process to build community and at the same time develop as individuals. In the course's groups, we went through periods of silence and intense sharing as well as dialogue, discussion and occasional conflict.

In the following, students speak for themselves. This is accomplished by presenting excerpts from students' online postings of their reactions after each of the three blocks. The original reflections are intended to contribute to improving students' capacities for constructive communication across language- or cultural borders, psychological growth, and reaching the course goals. Note that the course in 2012 was exceptionally rich in international attendance: Besides Czech and Slovak participants we had students from South Africa, South-East Asia and Russia. This is the primary reason why this course was chosen for the case study. In sum, 10 (rather than usually about 18) students participated in the course, which is about an ideal number for this intensive and just loosely structured event.

The students' voice: Excerpts from students' online reactions

Reactions after the first block

"Talking and sharing with new people gives me new perspectives on communication and I am thankful for everybody's contribution, whether I already knew them or not. I am constantly learning, an example: I got it quite right with empathy when I felt that some of us were afraid to move the chairs to the middle …"

"Though I have never attended any kind of subject like Person-Centered Communication, it's enriching and I'm really glad I can participate here. In the first block we spoke about problems of communication, [..] tried to solve some problems and so on. I think this is really useful for social life. I´ve met here many new people and listened to their interesting opinions that gave me new stimulations for other ways of thinking. "

An international student shared an important question the course had raised in him: "During the end of first block, I said that I had a pretty difficult question to think about. I told about active listening, and how it's hard to find a balance between listening to a person and being congruent with myself at the same time. This is indeed a tricky question, because when you are really actively listening to someone, you have to hide your ego, and in some extreme case - you do not perceive yourself, but put all your attention into perceiving the other person. [..] So, how to be a truly active listener, but at the same time be authentic?"

Another international student wrote: "During one of the discussions the following words were uttered: 'Experience is always broader than theory because theory is always shortened or cut down to the version of the one who had experienced it.' [..] This is because experience comes with emotion and feelings as opposed to reading which can be limited to just theory. For me this was the most interesting topic that really stood out and I have since read articles about it :-). I also enjoyed the atmosphere in the seminar. :-)"

"An interesting part of lesson for me was the discussion about the article on active listening. I was surprised in how many ways the same text can be understood."

"I really liked the way the course is given, especially on Friday when we were sitting in the circle, not hiding ourselves behind the desk. Our teacher and all the students are open to new ideas and trying to understand the others and this is what I really miss at other courses and generally in normal life. Maybe this could be a reason why the learning progress of this group is very unique."

Summarizing, the reactions illustrate, first of all, the positive atmosphere in the class. Based on that, participants are motivated, open to the unusual new experience, and even curious to learn from both theory and multiple participants' viewpoints. Note that the initial phases in a group process often tend to be more difficult and exhibiting more conflict. One reason why this was not the case in the particular course may be the fact that the majority of students had attended another person-centered course they liked, and thus trusted this course would be equally exciting and enriching. Another reason for the lack of conflict may be the fact that the facilitator structured the first block by suggesting activities like small team work and an active listening exercise in triads. In this way students became acquainted with each other as well as the experiential nature of the course, while also being busy absorbing some theoretical issues regarding the Person-Centered Approach. Furthermore, the international diversity, represented by open-minded students, made the sharing of experiences and "stories" exciting and kept the level of attention high.

Reactions after the second block

"Sharing is simply a great way of thinking, speaking out gives the idea somewhat new perspective."

"I can see the concept of significant learning - I like the attitude of the PCA, I try to implement it into my life, I am experiencing it, reading the theory of it and also practicing it in a kind of a learning mode in our group, which is also as a whole keen on PCA - and I see that it works. [..] This road is hard and slow, the goal is never to be fully achieved even after decades, but it is still exciting and fun. I was actually a bit sad for a moment last time when I thought about the fact that the next session will be the last one. Thank you everyone, I am looking forward to the next class."

A Czech participant noted: "Every opinion can change us in some way. Anyway, about this topic we have also talked at the beginning of the block. [..] I also like that we are not only Czechs, so we have to speak English all the time – also at lunch. Our soft skills are simply improving the whole day. I also consider it great that we can listen to the different ideas and experiences from people from other countries - this way we can also learn something new about our own nationality."

An international student reflected: "We somehow started helping each other in our ideas. Theory, suggested by M., found some support, we tried to develop it, add some personal ideas and explanation. Another remarkable point was our dialog exercise. I was surprised, that sometimes it's so hard to paraphrase what your partner said, and it's so extremely hard to explain your mind in simple understandable words. Concerning our group dynamics, sometimes I felt some disappointment, that some participants were more active and spoke a lot, and others were more silent. I always want more balance in interpersonal interactions, and it seemed to me that some participants were too shy to say something. So I really wanted to help them somehow, but I didn't know how. [..] We are growing and accepting more interesting and challenging tasks. And I believe that next session will be even better."

"First I must say that I like our international mix. I think that this group is good for discovering ideas, or may be making myself (and the others) think about my (their) patterns of behavior or responses. This is a condition for possible improvements."

Summarizing, the continued positive atmosphere in class encouraged participants to accept challenges, like questioning one's patterns of behavior and accepting that something like accurate listening that they thought would be simple, if not trivial, in fact was not! Students tended to acknowledge (rather than distort or deny) their current limits and welcomed the opportunities for development offered by and to each other in the course. The reactions also mediated positive expectations regarding the last block, which motivated the facilitator to make herself fully present to the students and look forward to the coming course block.

Reactions after the third block

"I really liked especially how Thursday began. Sharing from the first minute, running even long time after we should have had a break and nobody complaining. That means real interest was among us in the group. [..] It was great when we went to lunch together. Even during the search for the right restaurant we learned something about H.'s religion and habits related to it, talked, had fun...This is the great thing about these person-centered courses - the relationships that are created and strengthened through it. Amazing. We also continued after the course ended and played outside for two hours. [..] When I mentioned H., I must say that she enriched our group in many ways, but really significantly in the multicultural aspect and we got to think about many more perspectives. My learning is that everything is not black and

white but fuzzy is strengthening. [..] Actually, I feel this approach strongly supports creativity. New ideas are not judged, fear is not necessary, people cooperatively develop and learn ... [..] I now remember one more thing - how we developed an acceptance of silence. At least I personally had a feeling that I enjoy some time for digestion of so many inputs after intensive sharing and was not feeling awkward in any way. [..] Well, there is one wish I had, it was that this course does not end so fast. It could be partially fulfilled by the ideas we had at the end and the agreement on continuity of our person centered efforts…"

"I can say that the atmosphere in our group has changed during the whole course in the right way. We have known each other better and I think all of us feel very good and comfortable there."

"For me, the last block was the most 'relaxing'. But not because I did nothing, but because I was much more calm inside and had very few worries about everything. I didn't worry if something was right or wrong in the group, if someone speaks more or less, if I have to add something, or not. I was just enjoying the process, and I think that it was a great achievement."

"This workshop was the last and in my opinion the one I enjoyed the most. I do not know how to really put this in words but when I left this session I felt that the people who shared in depth on their experiences felt lighter and in turn I felt lighter. I believe that the level of respect keeps growing as we continue to learn so much about each other on a personal level. I really appreciated H.'s openness about her culture/country and her courage to share what was not entirely positive in her eyes, thus she said before sharing 'I do not want to say anything bad about my country/ culture'. I believe I have learned a lot from her character. During the sessions there were times when there would be some awkward silences and in my personal view I appreciated the silences as it gave me time to ponder on the previous speakers' shared thoughts. The combination of the theory that we have learned during the course has facilitated our growth through our own experiences."

"The atmosphere got really open and more than friendly. I realized that I have a lot in common with many others - personal problems, communication problems with others and even with myself. I appreciate our intercultural experience where we were openly discussing topics [..]. It is hard to name all the benefits by words, but I feel this is one of the strongest impulses to improve myself I have ever faced."

In general, the third and final block was characterized by participants' coming to realize that often things are not black or white and are best understood in context and with some sort of "empathy to the whole situation". For example, the fact that some persons spoke more than others initially has been perceived as disturbing while finally it became o.k. This also illustrates the increased acceptance for individual differences. Intriguingly, some participants changed their attitudes to basic phenomena like silence. While it had been perceived as "awkward" in the beginning, it turned to be experienced as meaningful for "digesting" the rich sharing and/or preparing for a new theme. These changes are directed towards inner "lightness", calmness and relaxation, using the participants' wording. This could indicate a higher degree of flexibility and less rigidity that tends to cause tension (Rogers, 1959; Senge, 2006). Another fascinating effect was the participants' wish to continue the experience. Some

of them intended to actively act on that wish in a self-organized way (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2008; Motschnig-Pitrik and Barrett-Lennard, 2010).

Self-Evaluation

At the end of the course, students were asked to evaluate themselves. The self-evaluation was supported by a special service of the eLearning platform. Students could write their self-evaluation in a free format, or they could respond to six questions that were suggested in the introductory text to the self-evaluation. For this case study, the following two aspects regarding students' experiential learning were selected:

- Significant experiences and their characterization (Timulak, 2010);
- The most important learning students were taking with them.

Significant experiences

Interestingly, what was perceived as significant differed from student to student. For example, students characterized *significant experiences* as follows:

- Every block was significant. I loved that different people from different countries have become friends.
- Always listen to other carefully and before giving any reaction understand the other's question.
- Definitely, there were significant experiences relevant to the group and you. You are great and deep thinking initiator and motivator to discuss, you can keep ideas as long as needed to react to someone's ideas not interrupting him/her. Your personality with the personalities of all other group participants contributed to the unique possibility to experience theory of person centered communication.
- I believe that the whole 3 weeks of workshop to me and hopefully to others was a significant experience on its own. Sometimes, as I was observing Dr Renate, I would see how she does not judge or dismiss something that someone had said … BUT instead she would try to understand why the person had said it and how she can best respond to that person. For me just to see her ability … at times was amazing.
- I think, the most significant experiences has happened, then people started to speak about something, which they usually don't like to speak. Like some cultural and family characteristics, thoughts about relationships, self-confidence, etc. These topics are really important, but we usually afraid to discuss them with others, only with people we trust.
- It was hard to keep up interest and participation. It was hard not to be nervous about if something is going wrong or not. But by the end, I started just enjoying this, and started to be more calm. And if you are calm and ready to enjoy the life, everything would be better and easier for you. It's more than just unconditional acceptance - it's unconditional enjoyment, which improves communication and life around you. That was my the most significant experience.

So, while some participants perceived the course as a whole as a significant experience, for others particular features or occurrences during the course stood out.

Most important learning students take with them

The most important learning, or outcome, in students' words, was the following:

- I think that this course … was very helpful, to force me to express me a little bit more. Thank you for it.
- The most important learning I take with me? Be good active listener if you want to understand people.
- The topics related to active listening gave me a lot about how to be better listener and I am trying to perform some way of active listening when talking and solving problems with my friends. I have also became less shy then I used to be before.
- The most important thing is, that trying to apply Rogers' variables in this group slowly started to become a part of myself. … I think it is amazing, and I hope it will become an integral part of myself once.
- I believe that it is the basic principles of active listening that really make a difference to the speaker and if we employ them then we can have healthier relationships and thus a healthier world and IT ALL STARTS WITH LISTENING AND CHECKING FOR UNDERSTANDING… .
- What do I take with me? Both new and stronger friendships, more experience with PCA, many great ideas and experiences of others, and I noticed that these dialogues and PCA in general really inspire creativity.

While active listening as a core competence was broadly acknowledged and improved throughout the course-process, some gained confidence in expressing themselves more, move to a higher degree of person-centered attitudes, or become more creative.

Conclusion and further work

According to person-centered theorizing and the students' and author's experience, the course described above would hold promise to promote learning from multiple perspectives and authentic experiences. This kind of experiential, collaborative learning is known to be deep and influential on building a self-structure that is a fluent gestalt acceptant of new situations arising in the richness of each moment rather than a rigid, made-up structure of pre-fabricated facts and beliefs (Rogers, 1951; 1961; 1980). The hypothesized increased adaptability of the self-structure, as evident from our case example, would apply regardless of the cultural background of participants and would form the basis for an increased ability to deal with diversity in a constructive way.

If the capacity for interpersonal communication and community building are to be improved in academic environments, then semi-structured workshops with person-centered intensive group experience should have their place in higher education, regardless of the specific field of study. More than that, in the courses on Person Centered Communication students tended to view person centered group sessions as providing them with unique opportunities for loosening cultural constructs, improving their capacity to listen, to understand, and to express themselves in ways to be understood by others, and to build community across cultural and linguistic borders. All these proved to be opportunities so far not attained in other academic course settings. This appears to confirm Rogers's view on person-centered intensive groups as highly potent social inventions of the 20th century. It even carries his view further to apply

equally in the 21st century, even though slight adaptation of Rogers' original concept , like online reactions after group session, appear to "upgrade" the original concept .

Interestingly, from several course instances, we have gained the impression/hypothesis that online reaction sheets (Motschnig-Pitrik, 2014), submitted and shared after each course block, have the potential to accelerate the group process. Students tend to become more strongly interconnected and known to each other. As a consequence, early phases of the group can be passed through more quickly and later phases with more trust, deeper expression and more understanding can start earlier. However, the effects of integrating online elements on personal learning/development and the group process remain questions for further research (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005).

There is no doubt that thoughtful course designs, skilled facilitators, and understanding as well as support from administration are needed to employ this potent, spontaneous setting for learning/development at the level of knowledge, skills and (inter)personal attitudes (Lago & MacMillan, 1999; Natiello, 2001; Motschnig and Nykl, 2014). Further work will proceed with empirical and action research on interweaving the rich presence typically found in person centered encounter groups with online elements for reflection and cooperation in order to confirm or modify the initial findings and hypotheses reported in this case study. We also intend to transfer the course concept developed at the University of Vienna to organizations and other institutions for higher- and adult education, in particular those that aim to socially include migrants with the local population. With this work, we aim to contribute to a thoughtful blending of face-to-face and online elements for facilitating improved interpersonal understanding and development of community within and across cultures.

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