

# I am my pedagogy - synthesis of my personal relational pedagogy

## Maria Kefalogianni



Maria is a Lecturer in Counselling & Psychotherapy at the University of Salford. She teaches across MSc and BSc programmes and is a module leader of Bereavement & Loss; Her current research interests are on autoethnographic methods of research enquiry and creativity in HE. Maria also holds a small private practice where she offers therapy and supervision for counsellors but also other professionals (ie. In social work, mental health etc). Amidst all this she is also a mother to a

toddler, a wife, dog owner and a curious not grown up child! As if this is not enough she is a member of the Lifewide Education & Creative Academic Team -and what a pleasure that is to be so! 😊

## What does my personal pedagogy mean to me?

My thoughts on this are still evolving but here is my first shot at a synthesis.

*My aspired embodiment of my personal pedagogy is the result of an amalgamation of various moments of growth in my lifetime; gained through my interaction with significant /people (students, clients other educators and theorists) /spaces/ resources, experiences and various theories which I have appropriated and the learning I have gained through my experiences and in applying those theories to my own circumstances.*

## Historic and current influences on my pedagogy

My pedagogical thinking and practice - my personal pedagogy, is very much influenced and shaped by everything which has contributed to make me the person that I am today. EVERYTHING - yet limited to the synthesis /meaning I give to this pedagogy in my here and now. This may (indeed is likely to) be modified as I am exposed to new influences - eg people, reading, experiences and circumstances. This belief stems from my closely held view that we see the world as we are, hence one could argue that we teach as we are. More recent influences are my core professional training as a Counsellor in the Person Centred Approach, my PGCAP training and my involvement in ongoing "reflective spaces", my ongoing interest in mindfulness and self-enquiry as well as my transition to motherhood.

Carl Rogers described our actualizing tendency as being an 'organismic valuing process', where we select goals based on our inner nature and purpose. This process may include any of the following principles:

- **Authenticity:** Getting away from defensive superficiality and being oneself.
- **Autonomy:** Moving away from what you 'should' to and making your own decisions.
- **Internal locus of evaluation:** Judgement based on one's own view, rather than seeking the approval of others.
- **Unconditional positive self-regard:** Judging and accepting yourself as valuable and worthwhile, including all thoughts and emotional reactions.
- **Process living:** Recognising that we are in a constant state of becoming and never reach a final end point.
- **Relatedness:** Seeking close and deep relationships where you can truly appreciate and understand other people.
- **Openness to inner and outer experience:** Being able to perceive and accept how others and oneself behaves and feels.

Rogers<sup>1</sup>

Below I will attempt to clarify how I *feel* those influences have shaped my currently perceived pedagogy.

## Influence of Carl Rogers



Carl Rogers is one of the most important theorists in my professional world and his writings have certainly influenced my thinking, my beliefs my practice as well as my way of life. In Rogerian theory<sup>1</sup>, we are born into this world with a state of an “organismic valuing process” where we are open to receive and symbolize all experience that are present in the moment without any inhibition or barriers biases or judgements. This process gets disturbed by “conditions of worth” which is our selective perception of our experience based on our need for positive regard. It is this need that “gets in the way” of our optimal growth. As a consequence we develop a self-concept which is formed around that need and in order to get that regard. In other words, our self concept is built in order to keep us “sane” from the threat of absence of that regard/love. It is in fact our actualising tendency which always looks out for opportunities to grow, but not without consideration to the context in which we grow. Sometimes this tendency can feel at odds with our organismic valuing process, because the environment we are finding ourselves in does not nurture us in a way which feels to us like we are growing and so our growth is somehow always consistent with the view of self we have<sup>2</sup>. It is nonetheless the force which “pushes” the self towards optima growth and oneness with experience.

During my first lecture on my MSc degree on “love”, I recall thinking “ This is the right path/career for me but am I the right person for this job ?”. I had the ability to enquire on my experiences with “shades of grey” from a very young age. Looking back I could experience the world intensely but I had not developed the “conception” or cognition to put words to it or the present environment to help me symbolise my experiences. I was feeling that I had a total absence of a guide (as in the original meaning of “pedagogos”) meant that I often felt I had to figure out my answers on my own. As a child it felt lonely and painful. This form of personal enquiry was never encouraged or praised so it was held in “secrecy” in my head, in my diaries, I was questioning everything. I recall sending messages to myself in the future, notes towards the adult me to remember how the “child me” felt and not to “mock” or “forget” this experiences I had as “right now it feels real”. I always remember feeling on a very visceral level that this recognition was important but I didn’t know why. It was only through my MSc training that I began to develop my sense of conscious awareness and begin to slowly give it and my life deeper meaning. Looking back now, this is what I call my “observing self” which has served and is serving me greatly in my current profession and teaching. My ongoing interest and practice in mindfulness and the element of the transpersonal serves as another medium for me to help me answer the question “ why now” in anything I engage myself in.

## **Influence of my own experiential learning**

Another important influence on the way I think and behave as a higher education teacher was my own experience as a learner: I came to know the Person Centred Approach in a highly experiential environment. This has reinforced my awareness and emphasis on the *experience* of my learners. I believe we carry and perhaps transfer our “inner learner self” into our “teacher self”. I would extend this idea and say that we carry our inner child in every step of the way\*. As a higher education teacher, I see myself as a facilitator to help students turn their experiences into learning and develop more concrete understanding from their synthesis and more meaning for themselves. This has influenced massively how I approach my teaching. When I first began teaching I walked into a class and started the lesson without any outline of objectives or aims, I was even dismissive over them for a while as I felt that they somehow constrained the process. I wanted to rely on my student’s inner wisdom and knowledge (I believe that people hold in themselves their own answers). Something in me innately rejected the need to break down in advance what I would teach.

## **Influence of my PGCAP experience and community forums**

But thanks to the learning I gained through my PGCAP experience I have shifted my perspective and embraced more the need to have an informed position about why I am teaching the way that I do. I aspire to be as transparent as possible to my students and explain, articulate my biases/agendas and where my ideas have evolved from. I want and aspire to offer them the space to explore in their own ways but knowing how my ideas have been influenced ( -I anticipate those ideas to keep changing. Adopting a creative medium and techniques is another way I feel helps me to achieve this aim. I see a real marriage between the psychotherapy (the Person Centred Approach), mindfulness practice and deep approaches to teaching and learning. Likewise with my clients, I want to be a fellow traveller to my students. I want to strive to trust their organismic process for growth by offering the right facilitative environment with empathy respect and unconditional positive regard. The environment in which we teach is crucial in influencing this creative force in each person to flourish.

## **Spaces that nurture and expand my pedagogy**

I recognise the vitality of nurturing spaces to keep me inspired and alert to my own creativity. My involvement in my PGCAP training , connecting to and becoming involved in the lifewide education and creative academic communities, my involvement in the community group I have set up, my role as a mother and daily play, my yoga and mindfulness practice, my interest in transpersonal modes of therapy, where do I stop?!: all these spaces I inhabit everyday provide affordance for experiences that have influenced and keep influencing my thinking and practices as a higher education teacher and contribute to my synthesis of my ever developing pedagogy.

## Classroom ecology

But how do these influences translate or transfer into the classroom? There is no straight answer to this. The idea that educators create particular environments through their teaching in which they demonstrate particular behaviours and lay the foundation for a culture for learning, is overlooked<sup>3</sup> I would also add that the facilitator's voice is indeed overlooked and not often invited to be heard or encouraged to be expressed by the institutional structure(s). I am yet to see a policy that states "Higher Education teachers are encouraged to share their vulnerabilities and their growing edges with their students". Whilst this is perhaps taking place informally, I am wondering what impact that would have on educators. What I allude to is that the context/environment in which we work feeds back into us and influences and affects the way we teach. It is this very intimate self which, I argue, shapes too and influences our teaching practice. This involves past experiences in life as a child, alongside our experience as learners.

As Armstrong<sup>4</sup> says, "As teachers teaching, it is a commonplace awareness that we need to 'model good practice', which is visible, experienced and open to scrutiny and judgement. But to lay bare our innermost thoughts and concerns - part of our very self and the construction of our own identity as a teacher is a far more risky business"... but I would also add, is far more valuable and enlightening, which prepares the ground for fertile discussions and dialogue, as hierarchies dissipate and more equal relationships emerge. Surely this honest declaration of self facilitates the types of relationship and productive interaction in the ecology of the classroom if our goal as a teacher is to shift from a pedagogy that is didactic to a pedagogy that is dialogic and seeks to co-create rather than impose the making of meaning.

## Multiple selves - multiple pedagogies

I believe that we have many selves...( many masks) that we use to meet our different needs according to the context or situation. As teachers we might apply this idea to argue we have many "teacher selves". I like the idea of multiple pedagogies and I feel I can represent myself in this way. But I also believe that a particular version of our self can get in the way if we don't have deep awareness of our actions with our students. I use doubt and self- enquiry as my motivating force in my process... it allows me the space to hold any model loosely and question closely held assumptions. Because of the nature of what I teach, I not only need/ want to role-model congruence and authenticity I need ( want) to fully embody it. I am learning to take more and more "educating and informed risks" with my students in an attempt to help them grow. I am allowing myself to be vulnerable and real, if that supports their learning.

In my teaching I often encourage moment to moment access to feelings and thoughts...responding very much in the here and now. **My mindfulness practice and ongoing personal development has helped me to** become aware of intrapersonal responses I recognise during my teaching. I can then use these responses to help me shift and change my delivery or engage in appropriate dialogue with students to deepen their learning . (give an example???) . **I often invite my students to access their experience , "inner wisdom" and encourage them to share it. My students engage all aspects of**

themselves in order to learn. I see it as my professional duty to help them access and use all aspects of themselves in learning. In that way I hope my students learn from the inside as opposed to the outside. I hope they learn to connect to aspects of themselves that encompass all aspects of their consciousness<sup>5</sup>. This is quite relevant in my field of practice which often calls upon student's trust into their intuition. Having said that, I argue that there is great value in our students "inner experience", feelings and senses. Experience is pre-conceptual and comes in contrast with the over-emphasis on "cognition"; which is why I feel it and the role of emotions in Higher Education is often overlooked.

### **An ecological concept of personal pedagogy**

Having created this synthesis I can see it is ecological in nature: it reflects my continuous development as a person and as a higher education teacher as I sense - observe, feel, think about and try to make sense of my material, social, psychological and intellectual world. Surely this applies to our students' development too? If we agree with this, might we then argue that there is value in helping students to engage with all their senses in their learning and draw informed and explicit meanings through their involvement in learning in such a manner ?

These thoughts are very much "under construction"...and I look forward to engaging in further discussions with colleagues and anticipate to see how my arguments will shift and change through these interactions.

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### **Sources**

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