Humanism and Open Education


Humanism is a school of thought that believes human beings are different from other species and possess capacities not found in animals (Edwords, 1989). Humanists, therefore, give primacy to the study of human needs and interests. A central assumption is that human beings behave out of intentionality and values (Kurtz, 2000). This is in contrast to the beliefs of operant conditioning theorists who believe that all behavior is the result of the application of consequences or to the beliefs of cognitive psychologists who hold that the discovery of concepts or processing of information is a primary factor in human learning. Humanists also believe that it is necessary to study the person as a whole, especially as an individual grows and develops over the lifespan. The study of the self, motivation, and goal-setting are also areas of special interest.

As with other approaches to learning and development, there are a variety of viewpoints within this tradition. The dominant view is called modern or naturalistic humanism and traces its lineage to Aristotle and Socrates (Gogineni, 2000). It is defined as "a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all supernaturalism and relies primarily upon reason and science, democracy and human compassion" (Lamont, as cited in Edwords, 1989). It is thus described as anthropocentric or human-centered.

There are two branches within this view: secular and religious. Advocates of a secular humanism believe that an individual human being has within him- or herself all that is necessary to grow and develop that person’s unique capacities. Religious humanists, on the other hand, believe that religion is an important influence on human development and advocate a communal aspect of their approach, albeit an atheistic one.

A small, but important, group within humanism disagrees with the atheistic thesis. They trace their roots to Plato, St. Augustine, as well as various other religious scholars and believe that, while humanity is a distinct species, existing separate and apart from all animal species, God or a Supreme Being is the center of humankind’s existence. Maritain (1936/1996, 1952) and de Chardin (1955, 1973) are two of the primary advocates of this theocentric (or God-centered) approach. Advocates of this approach believe that a human being is both material and spiritual, a reasoning, intellectual being endowed with free will. From this perspective, a human being’s highest purpose is that of voluntarily obeying God’s law. This is in stark contrast to the naturalistic humanist who believes that an individual must be true to himself, existing as an autonomous being, capable of self-realized development.

Perhaps it is the open advocacy of atheism by the modern or naturalistic humanists that seems to have drawn the ire of religious leaders toward humanism, especially fundamentalist Christians (e.g., Holgate, n.d.; Waggoner, 2001). This is in spite of the fact that modern humanists advocate a strict separation of church and state, especially in the domain of public education. The focus on humanism is somewhat curious as other scientific theories regarding
human learning and behavior also advocate a strictly materialistic view of human beings. For example, Skinner’s operant conditioning theory posits no significant differences between animals and human beings; Piaget’s cognitive development theory states that the only difference between a human being and an animal is that a mature human being acquires the ability to engage in abstract symbolic thought. Similar statements can be made of the vast majority of scientific theories. Surprisingly, the antagonistic focus on humanism exists in spite of the fact that it is the only school of learning and development which includes a strong, though small, advocacy group that proposes human beings are both material and spiritual beings.

**Principles and Objectives**

From the perspective of Huitt's (2009) systems framework of human behavior, the primary emphasis of humanistic education is on the regulatory system and the affective/emotional system. The development of these systems is often overlooked in our present education system (Am, 1995). The regulatory system acts as a filter for connecting the environment and internal thoughts to other thoughts or feelings as well as connecting knowledge and feelings to action. The affective/emotional system colors, embellishes, diminishes or otherwise modifies information acquired through the regulatory system or sent from the cognitive system to action. In our present environment of constant change and uncertainty, the development of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills discussed in these systems is especially important.

As described by Gage and Berliner (1991) there are five basic objectives of the humanistic view of education:

1. promote positive self-direction and independence (development of the regulatory system);
2. develop the ability to take responsibility for what is learned (regulatory and affective systems);
3. develop creativity (divergent thinking aspect of cognition);
4. curiosity (exploratory behavior, a function of imbalance or dissonance in any of the systems); and
5. an interest in the arts (primarily to develop the affective/emotional system).

The SCANS report (Whetzel, 1992) as well as Naisbitt (1982), Toffler (1970, 1981, 1990) and other authors (see Huitt, 1997) point to the importance of these objectives for success in the information age. It is important to realize that no other model or view of education places as much emphasis on these desired outcomes as does the humanistic approach.

According to Gage and Berliner (1991) some basic principles of the humanistic approach that were used to develop the objectives are:

1. *Students will learn best what they want and need to know.* That is, when they have developed the skills of analyzing what is important to them and why as well as the skills of directing their behavior towards those wants and needs, they will learn more easily and quickly. Most educators and learning theorists would agree with this statement, although they might disagree on exactly what contributes to student motivation.
2. *Knowing how to learn is more important than acquiring a lot of knowledge.* In our present society where knowledge is changing rapidly, this view is shared by many educators, especially those from a cognitive perspective.

3. *Self-evaluation is the only meaningful evaluation of a student's work.* The emphasis here is on internal development and self-regulation. While most educators would likely agree that this is important, they would also advocate a need to develop a student's ability to meet external expectations. This meeting of external expectations runs counter to most humanistic theories.

4. *Feelings are as important as facts.* Much work from the humanistic view seems to validate this point and is one area where humanistically-oriented educators are making significant contributions to our knowledge base.

5. *Students learn best in a non-threatening environment.* This is one area where humanistic educators have had an impact on current educational practice. The orientation espoused today is that the environment should by psychologically and emotionally, as well as physically, non-threatening. However, there is some research that suggests that a neutral or even slightly cool environment is best for older, highly motivated students.

**Open Education**

There are a variety of ways teachers can implement the humanist view towards education. Some of these include:

1. Allow the student to have a choice in the selection of tasks and activities whenever possible.
2. Help students learn to set realistic goals.
3. Have students participate in group work, especially cooperative learning, in order to develop social and affective skills.
4. Act as a facilitator for group discussions when appropriate.
5. Be a role model for the attitudes, beliefs and habits you wish to foster. Constantly work on becoming a better person and then share yourself with your students.

A meta-analysis completed by Giaconia and Hedges (1982) of approximately 150 studies of open education suggest that this approach is associated with

1. improved cooperativeness, creativity, and independence (moderate);
2. increased positive attitudes toward teacher and school, creativity, adjustment, and general mental ability (slight);
3. lower language achievement (negligible) and achievement motivation (moderate);
4. no consistent effect on math, reading, or other types of academic achievement; and
5. no consistent effect on anxiety, locus of control or self-concept.

It would seem, then, that open education, broadly defined in the terms used by Giaconia and Hedges, has not met the objectives and principles normally used to define humanistic education. While it has not been detrimental to basic skills achievement, per se, it has not had the impact on self-concept and locus of control as expected by its originators. In addition, the decline in achievement motivation is especially troublesome in light of the SCANS report (Whetzel, 1992)
that highlighted the importance of striving for excellence in order to be successful in a world economy.

**Carl Roger's View (Facilitative Teaching)**

One of the models included in the overall review of open education was facilitative teaching developed by Carl Rogers. Aspy and Roebuck (1975) studied teachers in terms of their ability to offer facilitative conditions (including empathy, congruence, and positive regard) as defined by Rogers (1969) and Rogers and Freiberg (1994). Teachers who were more highly facilitative tended to provide more:

1. response to student feeling;
2. use of student ideas in ongoing instructional interactions;
3. discussion with students (dialogue);
4. praise of students;
5. congruent teacher talk (less ritualistic);
6. tailoring of contents to the individual student's frame of reference (explanations created to fit the immediate needs of the learners); and
7. smiling with students.

Notice that all of these actions are congruent with a direct instruction model of teaching.

In a subsequent study involving 600 teachers from kindergarten through 12th grade, Aspy and Roebuck (1977) found that students in classrooms of high facilitative teachers:

1. missed four fewer days of school (5 as compared to 9 for low facilitative teachers);
2. increased scores on self-concept measures;
3. greater gains on academic achievement measures, including both math and reading scores;
4. presented fewer disciplinary problems and committed fewer acts of vandalism to school property; and
5. were more spontaneous and used higher levels of thinking (knowledge versus comprehension through evaluation).

**Summary**

In summary, the purpose of humanistic education is to provide a foundation for personal growth and development so that learning will continue throughout life in a self-directed manner (DeCarvalho, 1991). A lack of cohesiveness with respect to defining the critical components of the humanistic approach has hampered its development. However, the results of Aspy and Roebuck's (1977) study of facilitative teaching in comparison with the Giaconia and Hedges (1982) meta-analysis of open education suggest that Rogers' (1969; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) approach may be more descriptive of the critical conditions for achieving academic success as well as important affective and volitional outcomes. This is especially important in terms of the multiple dimensions of the components for success as described by the SCANS report (Whetzel, 1992) and Huitt's (1997) summary of the requirements for success in the information age. In
many ways, the positive psychology movement has its roots in humanistic psychology (Robbins, 2008), adding a more empirical, quantitative approach to humanism’s more philosophical, qualitative methodology (Seligman, 2002).

References:


