ROGERS REVISITED:
AN APPROACH TO THE LISTENING RELATIONSHIP
WITHIN THE ADVOCACY PROJECT

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This paper addresses Carl Rogers theory of therapeutic relationship called Client Centred Therapy applied to the relationship between advocate and student as found in the Secondary Schools Advocacy Project. This Project was established to support adolescents at risk of leaving school or at risk of not fulfilling their personal potential. The paper describes the program, the lessons arising from the program and applies Rogers’ theory to the one-to-one relationship between advocate and student. In particular the paper argues that Client Centred therapy provides a model which can be used to ensure that an effective one-to-one relationship is developed between the advocate and the student.

The Advocacy Project

The Advocacy Project was designed in Victoria in 1998 in response to a Government edict that adolescents under the age of eighteen, who were not in work but were receiving the Youth allowance, were required to return to school in order to continue to get the allowance. These young people may not have attended school for some years and in many cases may not have experienced educational success when they were students. (The Government eventually modified the edict so that youth allowance recipients who were "actively seeking work" did not have to return to school). Although the influx of young people returning to school did not eventuate, official attention had been directed to the needs of students who, for whatever reason, appeared to have difficulty in the school context.

The Advocacy Program is based on the notion that students who left school because of lack of success or those students who were at risk of leaving school need individual help and guidance within the school environment to adjust successfully to the school experience. One way to achieve this is to establish within the school a one-to-one relationship with a teacher for each student who would meet with the student on a regular basis and actively advocate on the student’s behalf.

The nature of this relationship is deemed pivotal to the success of the program. While there are many ways of successfully interacting as there are advocacy relationships, this paper argues that some key elements of the relationship process must exist if the student is to find the experience beneficial.

The program has been in operation for two years. During that time an ongoing evaluation has been in progress. Interviews with the students involved identifies that it is the relationship they have with their advocate has been an important factor in the increased success that they have experienced in school. This relationship is different from that commonly found between students and teachers, a relationship of unequal power, advice and transference of knowledge. In the Advocacy relationship, the advocate encourages the development of a relationship of shared power based on listening, empathy and acceptance.
As a member of staff at La Trobe University, Institute for Education, I have been involved in the Advocacy Program since its inception and the development of a model of relationship building has become an important focus of my attention.

Drawing on the work of Carl Rogers, I am concerned to develop a process that advocates will find helpful in their work.

Carl Rogers—Client Centred Therapy

The central element of Rogers’ approach to therapy is the notion that the client is the primary person in the client-therapist relationship, the person who knows what is needed and can, with help, articulate and direct the action to be taken. The therapist does not lead, advise, analyse or control the interaction or the client. Instead the therapist encourages and enables to client to reflect deeply on the issues at hand. The therapist listens and accepts what the client says and their perception of the issue or event. This empathic listening and acceptance empowers the individual who experiences a rare opportunity to explore, examine and resolve issues within a supportive relationship.

Of course, to act in this accepting way encourages the therapist to be aware of their own power in the relationship and committed to avoiding using that power to subvert the client. It requires patience to enable a person to develop the skills and reflection that empower one to make decisions likely to promote wellbeing.

It can be challenging for teachers to apply this model to secondary schools. Traditionally, the teaching role involves actively encouraging students to explore knowledge, absorb content and develop logical thinking processes and acquire self-discipline. The role of the teacher/advocate is to listen to the student and support them in their experiences and advocate on their behalf. This may require advocates to advocate in disciplinary circumstances, to liaise with subject teachers, to liaise with guardians from the student’s home environment or with government agencies.

This differs in a fundamental way from the relationship students usually encounter with their teachers in the school environment. The more rare is that the student experiences an adult person in their school environment listening to them on a more equal relationship than is often the case, can make a difference to the student and their experience of school. I want to enhance that experience for the student and advocate by suggesting a process of listening based on Rogers’ model which includes acceptance, empathy and congruence.

Acceptance

Rogers developed his approach through analysing his own experience rather than developing a theory and putting it into practice in therapy. It is, therefore, a very personal approach based on personal attributes rather than strategies. The capacity to accept another person for who they are is essential in this approach. This, combined with the listener interacting with congruence and empathy, is the first requirement of Rogersian listening.

According to Thorne (1992), acceptance encompasses, “the basic need for positive regard which Rogers believed to be universal in human beings and to be pervasive and persistent.” It implies a caring by the therapist which is totally uncontaminated by judgements or evaluation of the thoughts, feelings or behaviour of the client.” (Thorne 1992:37)

The power of true acceptance within a relationship cannot be undervalued. So much of the school experience for students is based on being judged and often found wanting in terms of skills, thinking and responding. Schools are often perceived by students and teachers alike to be institutions in which one is assumed to be deficient. There appears to be a common understanding behind school curriculum designs that students need to be crafted into a better person by judicious testing, evaluation and skilling.

Acceptance by a teacher advocate of a student within their environment is all the more powerful considering the pervasive atmosphere of the institutional aspects of schooling.

Thorne, in his description of acceptance, refers to “the basic need for positive regard which is pervasive and persistent”. If this need for positive regard is so pervasive amongst those of the human species, consider how often this need is met in the relationships with those with whom we surround ourselves, and also consider how often we felt such a thing in our own lives.

The Advocacy Program considers such a light, may be seen as a school or a relationship. The Advocacy program is introducing acceptance into a relationship in a subversive way. Rogers’ intention is to encourage the student to develop the attributes of a fully functioning person and to experience what that may feel like in a one-to-one relationship.

Empathy

Apart from teaching, one of the major roles of the teacher is to pass ruling on interactions between students or student and teacher which require discipline. They are called to judge, compare and discipline according to the internal judgements made after hearing both sides of a story. They are required to remain objective and rational and not enter unduly into the subjective experience of the student or combinations to pass a fair and rational ruling. To enter into the subjective experience of the student may cloud the issue for the impartial teacher. Any teacher, in the advocate role, may require the skills to set aside this rational, objective stance and enter into the subjective experience of the student.

Empathy can best be described as the ability to vicariously walk in the shoes of another and to feel what it is like to see the world as they do. To remain objective in a relationship is to stay within our own perceptions and to understand an incident or perception only from our own stance. Through empathy, we can enter into the experience of another and truly see the world as they see it. Through adopting similar body language, breathing, experience the world as they see it.

In order for acceptance and empathy to be possible, the therapist/advocate needs to be aware of the personal issues, powerful perceptions, values and beliefs they carry by which they judge their own life and that of others. Congruence is the ability to experience in the here and now without planning what you are going to say in future or relationship in the world that has just been said. It means that you are fully available to the client/student and do not carry prejudices about their behaviour, feelings or life situations.

Congruence means that the messages you send with your mind, mouth and body are consistent with each other; that you do not say ‘yes’ with your mouth and ‘no’ with your eyes. As a living, breathing organism, humans have the capacity to be aware of incongruence in others and to respond accordingly. Many of these understandings do not reach the consciousness of the client/student but nonetheless if the student feels that the
advocate is not being present or congruent with them it will undermine the trust so pivotal to the relationship.

Being congruent also means listening completely in the present in the relationship without taking time or energy to plan your next lesson in your head. This is not always easy to do. Teachers are busy people and advocacy is just another addition to their already heavy load. The time allowance is often 15 minutes per fortnight but a trusting relationship takes time to establish and often more than fifteen minutes especially for an important issue.

The relationship

The importance of the Rogerian approach in the Advocacy relationship can not be overrated. For students who have low self-esteem and low confidence, the opportunity to share their experiences in a one-to-one relationship with a teacher who understands and is willing to advocate on their behalf is unusual and powerful. The Advocate can support the student through listening and supporting through advocacy. The intention of the program is that the Advocate has an ongoing relationship with the student for the duration of the program even if the student leaves the school.

This situation arose in the first year of the program and the advocate continued to contact a student who had left due to parental ill-health. At the end of the year the student rang the advocate and asked him to liaise with the school so that the student could return and complete the year. The student gave the advocate to understand that without his support throughout the year, with regular phone calls and support, the student would have been unlikely to return to school. The advocacy relationship had influenced the student to complete his schooling.

Conclusion

Many of the students in the Advocacy project do not have a reliable relationship with an adult. The advocate cannot take on the role of parent, counselor or peer but can support the student in their search for personal empowerment so that they can make their own decisions about their life and their goals.

Using the approach of acceptance, empathy and congruence can lead to students developing the ability to hear their personal voice as one of integrity and empowerment. The role of the advocate in this process is complex and extremely important as it influences the student’s capacity to develop into a person who is capable of fulfilling their potential.

References


