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## **Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa**

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### **Las artes expresivas centradas en la persona: un sendero alternativo en la educación y la orientación. Entrevista a Natalie Rogers©**

### **Person-Centered Expressive Arts: An Alternative Path to Counseling and Education. An interview with Natalie Rogers©**

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#### **Resumen**

En esta entrevista la Dra. Natalie Rogers aborda la forma en que el arte y la expresión son puestos al servicio del crecimiento personal y grupal en la Terapia Expresiva Centrada en la Persona. Describe cómo, aunado a la herencia de su padre Carl Rogers, creador del Enfoque Centrado en la Persona, ha entrelazado su experiencia como terapeuta y mujer, para darle más espacio a lo intuitivo, creativo, emocional y a la fascinante exploración de la experiencia humana. Comenta cómo apoyándose en la plástica, danza, pintura, música, entre otras artes, creó un modelo que propicia la expresión auténtica y el auto conocimiento de la persona. Dibuja el perfil de un facilitador que con especial cuidado

crea un clima no sólo para juzgar a la persona, su obra, experiencia o los resultados; sino al contrario, es empático y acepta a la persona y su experiencia. Finalmente, discute las aplicaciones de este modelo al ámbito educativo tradicional, así como a los asuntos clave en el entrenamiento psicoterapéutico.

*Palabras clave:* Humanismo, educación y psicoterapia.

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Natalie Rogers PhD, expounds on how art and expression serve personal and group growth in Person Centered Expressive Arts Therapy. Adding to the legacy of her father Carl Rogers, creator of the Person Centered Approach, she describes the interweaving of her experiences as a therapist and woman, and how she afforded extra room in the process for intuition, creativity, emotions and the fascinating exploration of the human experience. Using modeling, sculpting, dance, painting, music, etc. she created a model which furthers the person's genuine expression and self knowledge. She sketches a profile of a facilitator who takes special care in creating an ambience where s/he not only does not judge the work, person, experience or results, but is on the contrary, empathetic and acceptant of the person and her experiences. Lastly, she discusses the applications of this approach to traditional educational settings, as well as some of the key training issues.

*Key words:* Humanism, education, psychotherapy.

Natalie Rogers, Ph.D., is the author of *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts As Healing*, and *Emerging Woman: A Decade of Midlife Transitions*, and numerous journal and magazine articles, all published in several languages. She is a pioneer in expressive arts therapy, leading trainings in Europe, Russia, Latin America, Japan, and the U.S. Dr. Rogers trained and practiced as a psychotherapist. Her personal mission is to facilitate personal and planetary healing by incorporating the expressive arts in cross-cultural work and for conflict resolution. Natalie founded and is currently a faculty member of the Person-Centered Expressive Therapy Institute, Santa Rosa, CA. She is a full-time professor (adjunct) at the California Institute of Integral Studies, the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, and the Distinguished Consulting Faculty at Saybrook Graduate School. She is an artist, mother, and grandmother.

**Laura Guadiana (LG):** You have dedicated your personal and professional time, energy and expertise to the development of Person-Centered Expressive Therapy, can you describe what it is for our readers?

**Natalie Rogers (NR):** The person-centered philosophy was developed by my father, Carl Rogers. This philosophy incorporates the belief that each individual has worth, dignity, and the capacity for self-direction. There is a trust in the human impulse toward growth. Each individual has an inherent ability to find exactly the

right personal answers when nurtured in an environment of empathic listening, non-possessive caring, and the genuineness of congruent openness and honesty.

The term "expressive arts" means using the various art forms to express inner feelings through an outer form to facilitate growth and healing. We encourage self-expression without concern for the commercial value or quality of the product. The arts –movement, visual art, sound, and creative writing– are a language of the soul and spirit that can be used to explore the range of human emotions and to develop a positive sense of the self.

Combining the expressive arts with Person-Centered Therapy is a natural evolution. In a therapeutic setting, expressive arts are a way to tap into the unconscious or the unexpressed –fear, shame, guilt, anger– that often binds us to a pattern of silence. Creative expression that is received with understanding and acceptance can help the client face these dark feelings. This can be the bridge to joy, sensuality, love, and compassion.

The person-centered expressive arts therapist explains to the new client that besides talking, other activities also exist within therapy to aid the process. In some situations, after the client has explored his/her thoughts and feelings verbally, using color or movement can deepen the self-understanding. These expressions are also a powerful language between the client and therapist. Art is a natural part of the flow of therapy. In other situations, clients may choose to begin with the arts and later, upon seeing their own creation, decide to talk about their experience. Using expressive arts is a very effective way to help clients identify their feelings.

Within the safety of the person-centered environment, people who tend to be highly rational and talkative, have the opportunity to allow authentic feelings to surface in a safe and constructive way.

For example, often when a client is feeling the loss of a loved one, the grief is so painful, there are no words that can come forth. However, using color or clay or collage or even movement and sound to express that grief non-verbally is extremely beneficial. The client is able to physically release some of the sorrow and at the same time gain self-insight. In my book, "The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing" I give such an example called, "Gail's Herringbone."

Often, anger is deeply repressed. However, using movement and sound in a safe, accepting therapy room, this anger can be fully experienced, and released. This emotion often shifts to sadness underlying the anger. Expressing rage through color and form also helps the client to transform it to useful, constructive energy. When people hold on to their anger it becomes like a volcano and eventually erupts. I believe this is one reason there is so much violence in our world. Children need an environment where schools and parents can say, "I can understand and accept all of your feelings, but you must learn to control your behavior. Angry feelings are normal, acceptable and okay. Acting out those angry feelings on others or on yourself is not permissible.

**LG:** Can you describe the process and postulates whereby your approach became differentiated from your father's? How does your perspective expand on your father's work?

**NR:** My image is that of a large tree. Carl's beliefs, his in-depth research, and profound skills are the roots of my tree. The tree trunk is that of a woman who looks at all life from a different body/mind perspective. The branches are the person-centered expressive arts: an integration of body/mind/emotion and spirit. The branches reach out to embrace the shadow and the light, female and male, logic and intuition, verbal and non-verbal and all of the ways we express our inner being through outer form. My continuing growth and vitality comes through my roots.

I studied and worked with my father for many years. His philosophy is not something I learned from a book. It is something I grew up with. It is part of who I am. In 1974 after I was divorced and had moved to California, I suggested we work together. We called together a staff of six people to create what we called the Person-Centered Approach Workshops. For seven summers we held intensive, residential workshops at university settings around the U.S., Mexico and England. Typical of Carl's encounter groups, there was a great deal of empathic listening to people's life stories of trauma and pain. Of course this was profound for all of the members of the group. However, I am a very kinesthetic, artistic, intuitive person, and I found that I could not sit still all day and evening listening to so much emotion. So I suggested we had a studio space where people could deal with these same personal issues, but used movement, sound, art, and psychodrama to express themselves. These were very experimental times. Other staff members worked with me to facilitate these afternoon sessions. We learned through experimentation that these art forms were tremendously transforming. Also, it meant that each person in the group could be working on his/her issues at the same time. There is something very magical about the collective resonance of a group of people each delving into their personal concerns at the same time, using color or clay or collage. I call it the "sacred space of creativity." The intense focus while creating from the heart brings forth an energy field that is very healing. We would talk about our work, as well. However, the creative process itself has healing qualities.

Out of this work I developed my own theories and programs. Using the expressive arts to enhance and deepen verbal psychotherapy is a natural evolution. More and more we are coming to understand the need to engage in processes that integrate all aspects of the self; the body, mind, emotions, and spirit. Simply put, we cannot integrate all aspects of the self without involving all aspects of the self. We do not become creative by thinking about it. We reawaken our creativity by engaging in the process of creativity.

Using the roots of my psychological training, I made some discoveries, also. Through my own personal experience (and later watching the process with clients),

I found that when I danced a sad or angry feeling in the presence of an empathic, non-judgmental witness my feelings and perceptions shifted dramatically. And when I drew the images after moving, the art became spontaneous, expressive, and revealing. If I followed the art with free writing, I plunged further into guarded feelings and thoughts. I realized that one expressive art form stimulates and nurtures another art form, evoking our inner truths which are often revealed with new depth and meaning. Inner healing was taking place. I call this the Creative Connection® process. Using various expressive arts in sequence heightens and intensifies our journey inward.

In order to get people to engage in the creative process –to get them up and out of their chairs– the facilitator offers them the opportunity to use the art materials. Giving suggestions or structured experiences within a group process is very different from the way Carl led a group. I believe there are many ways to be person-centered, however. We don't all have to do it the way Carl did it. In fact, he was always one to say he wanted people to use what he had learned and take it further.

Like Carl, I am against the medical model of therapy and art therapy. When clients or group participants share their art, the goal of the facilitator is to better understand the world of that individual. We don't analyze or interpret art. In my opinion, analyzing art can easily stifle the creative impulse within the individual. Telling someone who they are or what they are feeling by looking at their art often discourages the client from revealing him/herself in depth again. The intention of the client-centered art therapist is to encourage the individual to explore the meaning of their art, themselves.

**LG:** How does being a woman color your perspective regarding the role of art and expression in the learning process?

**NR:** Women in most cultures –certainly in the United States– are intuitive, non-linear, aware of their emotions, and expressive of their deepest feelings. Men, in our culture, have been taught to repress their feelings, excel at logic, technology, science and to use power to dominate. Women have felt the humiliation and degradation of being second class citizens. As you know, for many years in the United States we couldn't vote, couldn't own property, and we were brought up to be subservient to our male partners. Women all over the world have felt this long history of repression and abuse. Although I was born into a loving, middle class white professional family, the expectations for me were to play the role of a traditional female –very different from the expectations for my brother. So, of course I view the world differently. One mission in my life is to empower women through the creative process. Creative expression is a natural outlet for women. We gather together to paint and play, to dance and create rituals that will empower us. I am always searching for ways to have the kind of influence in the world that will create justice and equality.

In my travels as I take the Creative Connection work to Russia, Europe, Japan, and Latin America, I find that men in those countries are more willing to join the playful, creative expression than here in the U.S. I enjoy having male energy in my workshops. The *Ying* and the *Yang* need to engage whether it is within oneself or with another. However, I look at the decisions that are being made in the world, mostly by white men, and find myself upset and angry at the aggressive policies that are dominant. And the arts get squashed and put aside. This is tragic because art is a vital form of communication. It comes from our inner essence. It speaks across cultures. It is personal and universal.

**LG:** In what ways do you envision the principles of Person-Centered Expressive Therapy enriching the educational and learning process in schools?

**NR:** Students of all ages gain from a program of person-centered expressive arts. The therapeutic benefits are evident even when therapy is not a factor in the program. Expressive arts are a familiar and comfortable way for younger children to express themselves. Used this way the arts truly are a form of play. Younger children often do not have the vocabulary or advanced social skills to make themselves heard. Drawing anger or boredom, for example, provides a unique and effective way of communication. The advantage for younger school children is the addition of a person-centered atmosphere. Imagine a budding young artist being allowed to explore his or her natural talent without the pressure of "doing it the right way."

Contemporary writers have pointed out that as pre-teens and young adolescents go through school (in the United States, at least) they become resistant, perhaps even unconsciously holding back, to any spontaneous or individualistic outward expression. They fear the disapproving "imaginary audience," the censure of their classmates, the possibility that they won't fit in. Person-centered expressive arts work well with these kinds of self-esteem conditions. Movement is an excellent way to loosen up inhibitions quickly. In one school setting, for example, a lesson about the solar system was taught by assigning each student a planet to study. They were then asked to teach their classmates. Students designed costumes to represent each planet, put on roller skates, and together circled the sun in their various positions while explaining the particulars about their planet.

When students realize there will be no judgment –in fact, often no instructions– they gradually begin to create from an inner sense of self, free from self-imposed restrictions. An important part of the program's safety is that it is not mandated for everyone, but is a voluntary choice in response to a genuinely warm and accepting invitation.

By the time students attend college, they usually love the idea of occasionally interjecting a playful yet personally meaningful session of expressive arts to break up the silent attention in the traditional lecture format. Of course, behavioral and social sciences work especially well with this innovative approach. However, other more academic courses can also find ways to incorporate experiential learning now

and then. For example, finding humorous metaphors for math problems, acting out a moment in history through movement and sound, or demonstrating a science project through non-verbal symbols and drawings. When the imagination is free to express itself, the intelligent mind is also released into what contemporary academicians call "flow."

**LG:** Oftentimes, formal education becomes divorced from alternate models for learning. Many such programs have been forced to multiply and function on an island which is clearly separated from mainstream education. What have your experiences been with using the methodology that is born of your views and techniques for teaching and in what contexts?

**NR:** Personally, I have always taken the "alternative path" in my own education and in teaching. My parents sent us to "progressive" schools where we were encouraged to be creative, to think for ourselves, to challenge authority, and speak our mind. I never had a grade until I went to college. This background gave me the courage to be different in the way I thought about and practiced as a therapist and the way I teach in institutions. I have stayed away from (or been fired from) repressive job environments. In my early years as a therapist I started to use art and body awareness methods, even when I was employed by a State mental hospital, a guidance clinic and a psychiatric hospital. If I engaged my supervisors or my boss in conversation about the process I was using, and if the results were effective (which they were) I was listened to and usually given permission to further explore my methods. However, once I was working as a child therapist in an institution for emotionally disturbed children doing excellent work with parents, teachers, and children. A new director was hired and felt threatened by my popularity. He wanted to limit me to working with just a few children. I said I wouldn't "do less than I was capable of". He fired me.

In 1984, in California, I created an intensive training program, the Person-Centered Expressive Therapy Institute ([www.pceti.org](http://www.pceti.org)). In this way I continue learning as I facilitate groups that are open to experimentation. We were pioneers in this field and now find alternate academic institutions offering expressive arts programs. Although there is resistance from mainstream academia, if students want this kind of work and pay to go to programs that offer it, academia will eventually follow.

Also I teach expressive arts to graduate students who are training to become therapists. This is very rewarding. These institutions: The California Institute of Integral Studies, the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, the Institute of Imaginal Studies, and the Saybrook Graduate School, are all pioneers in humanistic and transpersonal psychology. I find that students learn the most by experiencing personal healing as they explore person-centered expressive arts in depth.

My students and group participants are taking this work into the mainstream. They are using the expressive arts for grief work in schools, with the elderly, in a restorative justice program, in substance abuse programs, in hospices, in mediation and conflict resolution programs and in businesses.

**LG:** Most schools offer art and other means for personal expression within the curriculum. What would characterize and differentiate the conventional approach from your person-centered approach?

**NR:** Probably the biggest differences concern the use of empathy and acceptance, and the refusal to direct the other person. First of all, most people correctly understand empathic listening to be an honest attempt to try to understand the other person, especially the inner experience of the other person. However, beyond that is a much deeper understanding that requires genuine connection to the spirit of the moment. Rather than merely saying to oneself, "Oh, I see, this is grief. I understand grieving," the listener wants to comprehend as closely as possible the precise and unique feelings that are circulating through this person at this time. That means there is more than grief, because no person is one-dimensional in their emotional expressions. Therefore, the person-centered listener tries never to apply diagnostic labels. The person fully explores his or her feelings and comes up with his or her own definitions.

Another difference is in how acceptance is used. Generally, people think of acceptance as agreement and even approval. For example, telling a child you like his work, or writing, "good job!" in the margins of her paper or drawing is seen as a kind of benign form of acceptance. But in the person-centered milieu, acceptance means something different. As a matter of fact, if you are accepting in the way just described, you are setting up the possibility that next time may not be so acceptable. Approval means you are capable of disapproving, and that is scary to a child, not to mention people of all ages. Here, acceptance means something along the lines of "you are free to do whatever you wish with these materials (with in social bounds, of course), or this moment. I will do my best to accompany you wherever you go in this experience".

Finally, that brings up the question of directives. Someone steeped in the person-centered philosophy, does not interpret or analyze for others, nor advise, label or diagnose. On the one hand, labels and diagnoses keep the listener stuck in his or her own perceptions and don't allow for true unbiased exploration. On the other hand, people intuitively sense when another has pre-determined ideas or is attempting to "handle" them. They may depend on their helper's best judgment to the point of dependence, or they may lose trust by feeling unseen and not respected.

So, school children in a person-centered expressive arts program are not told they are "good" artists, or even that they have to "finish" their project. They may explore their experience privately, or at the point they may wish to be observed, the observers/listeners demonstrate they want to understand what the deeper meaning is for the artist, how the artist interprets the symbols, what feelings are evoked in the artist. At some point the observers may wish to say what the person's work calls up in them, not how they evaluate it, but how they experience it at their own deeper levels.



I think this approach is very different from what usually happens in the hurried and product oriented climates of many classrooms.

**LG:** What kind of personal perspective and training would be necessary for a conventional teacher to incorporate Person-Centered Expressive Therapy principles in her day to day classroom activities?

**NR:** The best suggestion is for the teacher to experience the expressive arts firsthand in a person-centered training program. Instead of merely reading about or studying techniques, the teacher would learn experientially. This enables the teacher to see the world through a student's eyes. There is a fine line between being a teacher and being a therapist. Good teachers offer acceptance, empathic listening and a safe environment in which to learn. This allows the student to learn and grow in positive ways. However, teachers are not therapists, *per se*. Good teachers have rapport and gain a student's trust. The teacher needs to know the difference between a situational upset and minor emotional difficulties and an acute emotional disturbance so she can refer that student to a counselor or therapist. Teachers who create a person-centered environment by accepting all feelings yet limiting destructive behavior are creating an environment which prevents students from becoming deeply disturbed. The student will go through the dark tunnel of emotion to the positive light. I would like to refer your readers to the 3rd edition of the book *Freedom to Learn* by Carl Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg.

The most important thing has nothing to do with training, but more with attitude. The teacher needs to know how to "get out of the way," to trust that people can find their way and will end up stronger and happier for having the freedom to do so. The path is found because of the teacher's ability to walk alongside rather than lead.

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**Comment:** A CD-ROM archiving excerpted chapters from Carl's 16 books with 200 photos and counseling video footage.

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