



The Need for Person-Centered Education

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Abstract

We, the children of the Anthropocene Era, are entering the 4th industrial revolution and the impact is going to be pervasive and of greater magnitude compared to the previous industrial revolutions. The incoming changes, approaching at an accelerating speed, will be impacting everything and everybody and blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres; they will affect the bio-psycho-social dimensions, our narratives and even what it means to be human. If we are not farsighted and do not plan effectively, the results could be very problematic for all life forms on Earth. If we manage the 4th industrial revolution with the same blindness and forms of denial with which we managed the previous industrial revolutions, the negative effects will be exponential. But we are not impotent; we can manage this revolution wisely, increase the positive effects and mitigate the negative ones since technology is designed, made and managed by us. We cannot afford to be naïve and just hope that technology will automatically improve our lives; new and effective tools for understanding and governing such epochal changes are needed apart from the need for facilitating awareness in all stakeholders about the dangers and opportunities offered by the incoming changes. Effective forms of education are crucial. The fourth revolution could be an unprecedented success if we are able to manage complex processes and at the same time assure that each innovation will not only bring change but also foster a more humane, sustainable, peaceful and prosperous future for all. For effective governance, we need effective tools. One much-needed tool is the clear understanding of the crucial role played by the processes by which we humans construe experiences of ourselves, of others and other life forms. In other words, most of us still think we live in a unidimensional reality, but we live in a socially construed consensus reality, ignoring which may create crucial blind spots, diminish our coping capacities and resilience, thereby generating humongous self-inflicted damages. To meet these challenges, effective and scientifically validated person- and people-centered educational approaches are necessary. They will play a crucial role in enabling us to stop wasting our best resources—human and natural capital—and will facilitate us to achieve effective and sustainable governance.

1. The Problems we must face

“The trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be.”

– Paul Valéry

There is a large amount of scientific evidence that our present relationship with ourselves, others and the planet we live in is the main variable influencing all life forms and the planet itself, a dramatic epochal change referred to by scientists as the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000).

The human population's exponential increase favored by the first, second and third industrial revolutions in numbers, production and consumption behaviors has produced such dramatic and exorbitant costs to ourselves and all life forms. The United Nations estimates that at the present pace, the number of people on the planet is set to rise to 9.7 billion in 2050 with 2 billion aged over 60 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015).

According to the recent *The Living Planet Report*, the problems are getting worse as populations and consumption keep growing faster than technology's ability to find new ways of expanding what can be produced from the natural world. This led the report to predict that by 2030, if nothing changes, mankind would need two planets to sustain its present lifestyle.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2012) reminds us that the destruction and pollution of the environment have dire consequences on people's health: globally, 23% of all deaths and 22% of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) are estimated to be attributed to the environment.

In total, the number of deaths linked to the environment amounts to 12.6 million per year (based on 2012 data). This burden could be lessened significantly by reducing risks (WHO 2016a). Unfortunately, the risks and their impact are rising, the latest WHO report in 2016 dramatically shows that 92% of the world's population lives in places where air quality levels exceed WHO safety limits, which means that 9 out of 10 people live in countries with excessive air pollution. Every year, 3 million deaths are associated with exposure to outdoor air pollution. Over 4 million people die prematurely from illness due to household air pollution (WHO 2016c; WHO 2016d).

There are also other kinds of mounting problems around the world and in particular in the most prosperous countries. Paradoxically, on the one hand the world has had since the Second World War an exponential increase in the availability of material goods, services and connectivity, and on the other hand, an equally significant increase in the number of people that feel disconnected, depressed or burdened by narcissism, consumerism, self-exploitation and lack of meaning (Han, 2014).

There is scientific evidence that depression predisposes people to myocardial infarction (heart attack) and diabetes, both of which conversely increase the likelihood of depression. Many risk factors such as low socioeconomic status, alcohol abuse and stress are common to both mental disorders and other non-communicable diseases. There is also substantial concurrence of mental disorders and substance use disorders. Taken together, mental, neurological and substance use disorders exact a high toll; they accounted for 13% of the total global burden of disease in the year 2004. Depression alone accounts for 4.3% of the global

burden of disease and is the single largest cause of disability worldwide, 11% of all years lived with disability globally, particularly considering women. The economic consequences of these health losses are equally large (WHO, 2013).

The WHO reminds us that every year more than 800,000 people end their own lives and there are many more people who attempt suicide. Every suicide is a tragedy that affects families, communities and entire countries. Globally, it was the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year-olds in 2012. The number of suicides increases during moments of crisis with a breakdown in the ability to deal with life stresses, such as financial problems. In addition, experiencing conflict, disaster, violence, abuse, loss and a sense of isolation is strongly associated with suicidal behavior. Suicide rates are also high amongst vulnerable groups who experience discrimination, such as refugees, migrants, indigenous peoples, LGBTI persons and prisoners (WHO 2016b).

To make things worse, the effects of climate change, such as the acidification of the oceans, the desertification of large parts of the planet, the increasing deforestation and destruction of biodiversity, interact with other explosive realities. There are still an enormous number of people suffering from hunger, ill health, wars, terrorism, violence, unequal access to resources and opportunities, racism and many forms of discrimination and injustice. Many people are forced to leave their homes and countries due to warfare and ethnic or religious fanaticism that enlarge the growing numbers of refugees and migrants, which in turn creates an escalating spiral whereby they become the innocent targets of fear and bigotry in nations where they seek refuge.

A mounting number of scientists warn us that we are fast reaching the tipping point, where mitigation and/or reversal of trends will not be within our reach if we do not act promptly and effectively (IPCC, 2007, 2013, 2014).

The fourth industrial revolution could help us exit from this human-produced quagmire, only if we are capable of effective planning and governance.

For sure the fourth industrial revolution will create new problems. It is estimated that massive unemployment of unskilled workers and the disappearance of some jobs becoming automated by computerized machines will be one of the effects of the changes looming ahead that we will need to deal with: The International Labour Organization (ILO) has estimated that in the next 10-20 years, the number of jobs threatened by new technologies will be around 47% of the total jobs in the United States and between 40% and 60% in Europe (Degryse, 2016).

Rising inequalities is another big problem. According to Credit Suisse's *Global Wealth Report 2015*, the richest 1% of the population now owns half of all household wealth. Oxfam's new report states that 62 individuals control more assets than the poorer half of the world's population. Researchers such as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have found that unequal societies tend to be more violent, have higher numbers of people in prison, experience greater levels of mental illness, have lower life expectancies and lower levels of trust. These inequalities will create even more fears and backlash against change. The rise

in interconnectedness will bring rising dangers on security, cyber terrorism and likely create a 1984-like scenario; there is also the risk that the cyber revolution may deprive us of our privacy right, creating some planetary Big Brother effect (Maynard, 2015).

“Our relationship with ourselves, others and the world is an important determinant of our mental, physical, and social health.”

All these smart machines and smart customized services can become self-inflicted forms of destruction of human capital if we do not plan the Internet of Things wisely or design smart machines to be not only smart, but also wise and people-centered.

Of course we all enjoy the new opportunities of being connected, having access to connect to people and services—undreamed of until a few years ago—that the technological multinationals are offering us for free. At the same time these new opportunities go hand in hand with profound changes that may also bring about some boomerang effects: Various nations have lost technological sovereignty without which their economic and cultural sovereignty have been greatly reduced. The artificial intelligence power that some multinationals are acquiring simply by sucking up the data of millions of people that are using their free services does not have equals, but this kind of innovation, for some new media sociologist like Evgeny Morozov, brings a risk of democracy being replaced by a futuristic scenario of technological Big Data feudalism (Morozov 2013). It is obvious that in all these scenarios, prevention is far more feasible and less costly than to wait and see and eventually being forced to do emergency repair jobs when it is too late.

2. What to do

We can do several things for planning and governing the fourth industrial revolution in a people-centered and sustainable way; they all have a common denominator: to ensure that the planned changes are person-, people- and community-centered and sustainable. It is imperative to identify the barriers, to achieve these goals and work effectively to identify, remove or reduce the barriers (Norgaard, 2011); (Zucconi, 2013, 2016).

“You know, the principle of empathy gives broader meaning, by the way, to Dr. King’s philosophy of nonviolence...”

It seems like we got an empathy shortage, an empathy deficit. More serious than the federal budget deficit. We’ve become so cynical that it almost seems naive to believe that we can understand each other across the gulf of race, or class or region or religion...”

Barack Obama, *Martin Luther King Day, Chicago IL, Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, January 21, 2002*

I strongly believe that some of the variables that will effectively foster a more humane and sustainable future are:

- More awareness
- More empathy
- More capacity for respecting oneself, others and the world
- More responsibility (in the sense of the ability to respond)

Since reality is socially construed, in order to have a fourth industrial revolution that will protect and promote human and natural capital, we need to educate and empower everybody to make their contribution to achieve this goal.

“Person-centered Approach focuses on health and not on illness, on capacities rather than on limitations; empowers and promotes learning, well-being and resilience by facilitating the development of the potentialities of individuals, groups and organizations.”

3. Create and Use Effective Tools to Promote Sustainable Change

Our relationship with ourselves, others and the world is an important determinant of our mental, physical, and social health. When people and societies are alienated from parts of themselves, they relate to others and the planet in alienated and distorted ways.

For example, at present, profit is calculated in a mechanistic reductionist way, the so called “bottom line”; at the national level we still use the Gross National Product, whose standards completely ignore the destruction of human and natural capital. With a more realistic and sustainable approach there are at least 3 variables that account for the so-called Triple Bottom Line (TBL) which measures economic, ecological and social results. The Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) also takes into consideration cultural aspects like governance (Zucconi, 2013).

Recently, an Inclusive Wealth Index (IWI) has been formulated. It has a broader way of measuring natural capital, such as forests; produced capital, such as roads and factories; and human capital, which includes levels of education, knowledge, and creativity. Preliminary findings indicate that it is possible to trace changes in the components of wealth by country and link these to economic growth, and the impact of declines or increases in natural capital as an economic productive base (UNU-IHDP, 2012). Effective economic growth can be attained only through ecologically conscious green or blue economy (Pauli, 2010).

We need to apply effective metrics and create new ones. We need to use in future planning and project management some effective human capital and environmental impact assessment scales, or use tools already available like the Health Impact Assessment (HIA) to measure and predict health consequences (WHO 2016a). If such assessments are performed at the

planning stage, we can have projects with a focus on sustainability, people-centeredness, quality, vulnerability and resilience factors.

4. Use Scientifically Validated People-Centered Tools

To better manage the present situation, we do not need to start from scratch, many effective tools are already in existence and they have ample scientific validation for their efficacy and efficiency. Here is a partial list of some of them:

- **The Person-Centered Approach** is a scientifically proven effective way to create solutions on a win-win basis. The Person-Centered Approach (PCA) is a systemic, holistic approach applied successfully in interpersonal relationships including conflict resolution. PCA focuses on health and not on illness, on capacities rather than on limitations; empowers and promotes learning, well-being and resilience by facilitating the development of the potentialities of individuals, groups and organizations. PCA helps people to grow, learn self-regulation and take responsibility for what they do rather than fostering dependency.
- **The Person-Centered Planning** (PCP) is another scientifically sound and process-oriented approach designed to empower people. It focuses on the people and their needs by putting them in charge of defining the direction of their lives. PCP is being applied successfully in many settings and in particular in the design and management of health and special needs facilities.
- **The People-Centered Approach** (PeCA) is a scientifically validated, interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach designed to be employed in large scale projects focused on fostering the maximum level of effectiveness in protecting and promoting human ecologies and natural ecosystems and promoting sustainable change. The People-Centered Approach (PeCA) is a values-oriented approach based on equal rights, deep respect for all forms of life, cultures and traditions. Lately, even the International Labour Organization is recommending the use of People-Centered Approaches (Kiniger-Passigli and Biondi, 2015). The PeCA promotes empathic understanding, mutual respect and effective communication and collaboration among different stakeholders through actions of empowerment and resilience.

5. Identifying the Barriers to Sustainable Person-Centered Change

Notwithstanding the seriousness of the threats, and the urgency to deal with them, many obstacles remain in the way of effective and sustainable governance at the local, national and international levels. The lack of awareness of the magnitude of the problems and the changes needed in the behaviors of all the stakeholders to manage the serious mounting challenges facing humanity is in part due to barriers of a sociological and psychological nature that impede effective coordinated actions of various stakeholders. The underlying mechanism at work in the promotion or resistance to change or the denial of threats like climate warming varies from culture to culture: how reality is socially construed and how individuals and organizations construe their experiences and narratives are relevant for the understanding of

the promotion of change needed to promote sustainable governance and to deal effectively with the barriers to change (Zucconi, 2013, 2016).

6. Reality

“Reality isn’t what it used to be”

– Walter Truett Anderson (1990)

In the age of globalization and of growing complexity, in order to meet the challenges of our present and future, we need new and effective ways to facilitate the capacity of awareness and integration in our ways of knowing and behaving. We need to foster a new socio-psychological literacy for billions of people; a socio-psychological compass and a holistic/systemic way of being in relationship with ourselves, others and the planet, to enable us to navigate the rippling currents of change.

Nowadays, decision makers and experts seem not to take notice in their blueprints of the governance of how individuals, communities, societies and cultures are fully immersed in the ways they call reality and perceive it, which in effect is not quite what they intend—reality as an objective fact. What they call reality is the way individuals construe their experiences of the so called reality at the personal and societal levels.

The ways individuals and communities construe their experiences can be very useful in helping them cope effectively with their circumstances, but only if they foster a clear understanding of how problems are generated and how they can be effectively resolved or mitigated.

As the history of humankind amply shows, the construction of experience mistakenly taken for objective reality can, even with the best intentions, create destructive boomerang effects, immense sufferings and has even resulted in the downfall of some empires and civilizations in the past.

The way we still use some dysfunctional metrics to measure growth is one of the many examples of how we make ourselves blind to the obvious: We can still read in the daily news that the economy is growing even when society is bent on effectively destroying its human and natural capital, impacting present and future generations negatively and behaving like cancerous cells multiplying in a living organism.

Drawing national borders with a ruler might look neat in a geo-political map of post-colonial nations but that blindness to reality will provoke chaos and immense suffering for generations and spread to larger areas, as the present social pandemic of violence seems to indicate. Only blindness can explain the recent behaviors that some of the most advanced nations have adopted in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and the Middle East. Only blindness can explain the lack of preparation for the consequences from the dislocation of immense numbers of people running away for life from their war torn countries, risking their lives to have a chance in more safe and prosperous countries, but who in turn experience a rise in fear of insecurity, which generates the rise of populist politics, racism and violence.

“The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these.”

– Berger & Luckmann, 1966, page 19

“We need to foster at every level of society an awareness of the social construction of reality, of our powers and responsibilities for the present and the future of humankind and the whole planet.”

What is perceived as real varies from society to society and is produced, transmitted and conserved through social processes. Our perception of reality is largely modeled from beliefs and assumptions that are typical of the society and culture to which we belong. What we know, what we consider true and right, the behaviors we adopt, all are influenced by the social/cultural environment in which we live. This process happens through the internalization of “reality” that occurs during the socialization process.

We need new and effective ways of coping with our rapidly changing realities. A way to become aware of how we construe our experiences of what we call reality, the relationship with ourselves, the others, the world. We need to foster at every level of society an awareness of the social construction of reality, of our powers and responsibilities for the present and the future of humankind and the whole planet (Anderson, 1990, 1997, 2016).

Socio-cultural and personal constructs are the ways in which communities and individuals construe their experiences at the emotional and cognitive levels. The social and personal constructs are interacting with and influencing the social and individual dimensions all the time.

Some of the variables influencing us are:

- Our relationships with significant others—parents, siblings etc., by the roles that they give us and by the ways of being (constructs) we introject which become part of our personality, influencing how we relate with ourselves, others and the world.
- The social environment through the imposition of societal norms.
- The narratives we absorb from kids’ fables, cartoons, movies, TV, social media, popular heroes.
- The formal and informal education we receive.

For all the above reasons, we need to educate everybody to understand the social and individual processes that lie at the base of the construction of narratives that we call reality. What we call reality is a consensus reality and is largely shaped by our beliefs. If our socially construed and personally construed beliefs are made conscious and their values made explicit,

we can examine them and verify if some of our beliefs are obsolete or dysfunctional, so we can update and replace dysfunctional ways of thinking and feeling with more functional ones, a process that is characteristic of fully functioning persons (Rogers, 1965); (Zucconi, 2013).

7. Effective Education

No other institution in the world is as powerful in shaping our future as education, since it is only during the educational process that much of the social construction of reality occurs. Education is the process by which the minds of the new generation are shaped about what is real (Dewey, 1897, 1924); (Rogers, 1969, 1983); (Freire, 1970); (Foucault, 1980); (Zimring, 1994); (Morin, 2001, 2007a, 2007b); (Rogers, Lyon & Tausch, 2014); (Zucconi, 2013, 2016).

Francis Bacon stated that knowledge is power. Most people will agree with that, but for many, it is still not automatically self-evident that to have faulty knowledge is to lose power and is a lethally effective form of socially self-inflicted harm. Present traditional education often stifles our natural learning abilities unintentionally.

All lifeforms' survival depends on effective and rapid learning as to how to adapt their behaviors to environmental changes. We need to retool and upgrade all levels of our education. Formal and informal education at any level needs to offer us the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable us to survive and even prosper in the present period of change by learning the needed skills for coping and governing in peaceful and sustainable ways through the turbulent scenarios of the Anthropocene Era.

*“Education and health go hand in hand.
The evidence demonstrating the links is overwhelming.”*

– Margaret Chan

Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), *MDG Summit: Remarks at Roundtable 2: Meeting the Goals for Health & Education, New York, September 20, 2010*

Education is the wellspring of our wellbeing, prosperity and resilience; it is through education that we human beings can transcend some of the physical limits of biological evolution. There is ample scientific evidence of the connection between health and education, education and prosperity (KPMG Foundation, 2006); (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006); (Every Child a Chance Trust 2009); (OECD, 2010); (WHO, 2013, 2016a, 2016b).

8. The Effects of Education on Health

Cutler & Lleras-Muney report that an additional four years of education lowers five-year mortality by 1.8 percentage points; it also reduces the risk of heart disease by 2.16 percentage points, and the risk of diabetes by 1.3 percentage points. The significant association between education and health has been observed in many countries and time periods, and in a wide variety of health measures. The differences between educational inequalities are significant: in the U.S. in 1999, the age-adjusted mortality rate of high school dropouts aged 25 to 64 was more than twice as large as the mortality rate of those with some college education (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006).

Not only is education an important social determinant of health, but higher levels of education help to create healthier, more cohesive, prosperous and resilient communities and nations. The benefits of education include better levels of social engagement, an important variable of cohesive, safer and healthier societies. At the individual level, the knowledge, personal and social skills provided through education better equip individuals to access and use information and services to maintain and improve their own health and their family's (Feinstein et al. 2003).

“Effective education needs to protect and promote the enhancement and actualization of the natural qualities of empathy, respect, deep contact, creativity and resilience.”

To be more effective, education needs to be people-centered and empower people to be in contact with themselves, others and the world, instead of stifling the natural human capital as often is the case with traditional education. Effective education needs to protect and promote the enhancement and actualization of values like empathy, respect, deep contact, creativity and resilience (Rogers, 1969, 1983); (Gershon & Vincow, 1997); (Lambert & McCombs; 1997); (Catalano & Catalano 1999); (Thorkildsen, 2011); (Zucconi, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2016); (Costa, 2014).

If I am able to relate to myself with respect and empathy, then it is much easier and natural for me to relate to other human beings with respect and empathy, even those with different beliefs and customs. This is not mere wishful thinking, there is ample scientific evidence that shows that people who are able to relate to themselves with respect and empathy are not only able to relate to other human beings with respect and empathy, but they are better capable of being in touch, of perceiving life around them and attuning themselves empathically with all other life forms. This way of being is not exceptional, it is typical of mentally healthy human beings (Rogers, 1951, 1961, 1969, 1977, 1983); (Zucconi, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2016); (Silani, Zucconi & Lamm, 2013).

Unfortunately centuries of spreading alienation have made lack of contact and chronic reification “normal”. Those alienated individuals that relate to themselves, others and the world, like something that can be turned into a commodity and sold for monetary gain, are considered smart and successful by many other equally alienated human beings. The results are irresponsible environmental exploitation, social injustice and the destruction of our planet. It is encouraging to see what Pope Francis has pronounced in his encyclical ‘*Laudato Si*’, an effective call for an ‘ecological conversion’ of every good Christian, a person who in his/her feelings and behaviors respects every human being and living creature irrespective of differences. If spiritual and political leaders and opinion makers offer a congruent narrative of the vital importance of establishing relationships based on respect and empathy with all life forms, this message would be an excellent teaching and such motivational narratives, if introjected, will have significant positive results.

Education at its best is a bio-psycho-social-spiritual learning experience that promotes our capacities to live a significant existence and develop our potentialities to become creative, resilient and productive citizens.

“We need to create a new paradigm in education in order to enable education to serve people’s needs and to have relevance in public service, social responsibility and sustainable governance and development.”

How we reorganize education is very important for our present and future, since learning is for our species an empowering and adaptive way to accelerate change. Human educational activities and organizations may represent the most important way for humans to ensure our own survival and to save our planet. The World Academy of Art & Science (WAAS) has launched a project with its sister institution, the World University Consortium (WUC), to create a space open to all the stakeholders to brainstorm and retool education to serve people’s urgent needs and to better cope with present emergencies.*

An effective people-centered education is needed to create more aware and resilient citizens who will integrate knowledge, promote collective wisdom, build a sustainable society in which duties and responsibilities are equally important as rights and equal opportunities.

9. Person-Centered, Student-Centered Education

Education, apart from family and culture, is one of the fundamental building blocks of the social construction of reality; it is more and more evident that we need a paradigm change in traditional education in order to enable people to deal effectively with the mounting challenges facing humanity.

This retooling needs to start with our frames of reference.

We need to create a new paradigm in education in order to enable education to serve people’s needs and to have relevance in public service, social responsibility, sustainable governance and development.

Education is one of the main narratives to prepare new generations to be an active and constructive part of society and is one of the main carriers of values. Values can be implicit or explicit.

Theorists like John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky, whose collective work focused on how students learn, have laid the groundwork for student-centered learning. Carl Rogers’ ideas and research on the functioning of human beings have contributed significantly to person-centered education, promoting student-centered and lifelong learning throughout

* See <http://wunicon.org>

one's lifespan, underlining the importance of teachers to become more effective by helping them become facilitators of learning. In order to be effective facilitators of learning, teachers need to learn and be capable of creating with the learners a facilitative empowering environment based on trust, empathy and respect.

Of course an exhaustive illustration of this topic would require my mentioning many more authors, a task impossible to accomplish in this paper. I just want to add that the world famous pedagogist Maria Montessori was a forerunner of student-centered learning, facilitating preschool children to learn through independent self-directed activities. Malcolm Knowles is also one of the major figures in student-centered adult education who has applied Rogers' ideas (1975, 1984a, 1984b, 1990).

"Traditional education ignores or suppresses learner responsibility."

– Armstrong (2012)

Self-determination theory focuses on how an individual's behavior is self-motivated and self-determined. When students are given the opportunity to evaluate their learning, learning becomes an incentive.

In the traditional teacher-centered teaching, teachers have been the primary source of knowledge. In a student-centered classroom, self-regulation, empowerment and active learning are facilitated.

10. Student-Centered Assessment

"I believe that the testing of the student's achievements in order to see if he meets some criterion held by the teacher, is directly contrary to the implications of therapy for significant learning." – **Carl Rogers**

"I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn." – **Albert Einstein**

One of the most crucial differences between student-centered learning and teacher-centered learning is the assessment. In student-centered learning, students actively participate in the evaluation of their learning. Having an assessment process that involves the entire learning community in a sort of *action research* to measure the learning outcomes is an important aspect of student-centered education and a significant way to support learning and motivation and an essential variable for assuring the success of the application of student-centered approaches.

*"Talk to me ... and I will forget
Show me ... and I will remember
Involve me ... and I will understand
Step back ... and I will act."*

– Confucius

Student-centered education fosters transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and reflective thinking. The revised *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* states: “Institutions should ensure that programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.”

In Europe, student-centred learning has increased in prominence over the past few decades. The Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Communiqué (Bologna Process 2009) underlines the relevance of student-centered education for effectively coping with the present societal changes (Geven & Attard, 2012).

“European higher education also faces the major challenge and the ensuing opportunities of globalization and accelerated technological developments with new providers, new learners and new types of learning. Student-centred learning and mobility will help students develop the competencies they need in a changing labour market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens” (Bologna Process 2009, p. 1).

11. The Issue of Power Redistribution

Existing research clearly shows the effectiveness of person-/student-centered education at every level and grade but there are some barriers that have slowed down the application of this approach; the major obstacles are the so called power issues. Student-centered learning is a process that requires power sharing and responsibilities sharing at the policy level, administrative level, curriculum development level, assessment and evaluation level, classroom management and relational level. Another important issue determining success or failure is the obvious fact that change has to be facilitated effectively by competent professionals in a systemic way. In the past there have been easily predictable and preventable failures, since one cannot just wish to change a school or an university by calling it student-centered; the staff and the teachers need to be retrained and motivated and in the retooling of the educational institution, the students/learners and all the stakeholders need to be actively involved in the process.

Teacher-Centered Learning

Teacher has the power

Student has less choice

Students have a passive role

Person-/Student-Centered Learning

Empowerment of students

Student has more choice

Students have an active role

In order to be effective, projects aimed to facilitate change in an educational institution have to involve actively all the stakeholders, carry out a force field analysis, a feasibility study and promote change on a win-win for all base. Never forget that it is not only students that become better learners if they are understood, respected and empowered, but administrators and teachers are human too; they will be better administrators and teachers if their needs, ambivalence and fears are understood, respected and taken seriously into consideration. In other words, a student-centered learning project, in order to succeed, needs to be person-

centered, involve the whole educational community, thereby becoming a sustainable people-centered project (Zucconi, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2016).

“The central hypothesis of the Person-Centered Approach is that individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for changing their self-concepts, basic attitudes and self-directed behavior, and these resources can be tapped if a climate of facilitative psychological conditions is provided.”

In Person-Centered Education (PCE), also called student-centered education, values are made explicit to facilitate students to have a critical and proactive role, an effective training to make them become fully functioning members of the Polis.

The Person-Centered Approach (PCA) was originated by the late Dr. Carl Rogers. PCA is a scientifically validated systemic, holistic approach with applications in all the helping professions: Psychology, Education, Medicine, Social Work, Management, Intercultural communication, conflict prevention, etc.

The central hypothesis of the Person-Centered Approach is that individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding and for changing their self-concepts, basic attitudes and self-directed behavior, and these resources can be tapped if a climate of facilitative psychological conditions is provided. PCA focuses on health, not illness; on learning, not on teaching; on solutions, not on problems. PCA empowers, rather than cures; promotes the development of potentialities of individuals, groups and organizations through safe and growth-promoting interpersonal relationships characterized by respect, trust, empathic understanding and authenticity. It focuses on supporting people's creativity and resilience, and makes them feel responsible for what they do rather than encouraging dependency (Barrett-Lennard, 1998); (Zucconi, 2008, 2011, 2013); (Rogers, Lyon & Tausch, 2014).

“So while I still hate to readjust my thinking, still hate to give up old ways of perceiving and conceptualizing, yet at some deeper level I have, to a considerable degree, come to realize that these painful reorganizations are what is known as learning.” – **Carl Rogers**, *On Becoming a Person*, 1961

“The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change.” – **Carl Rogers**

Carl Rogers has identified some core conditions present in teachers that are effective facilitators of learning and relational capabilities.

“Over the years, however, the research evidence keeps piling up, and it points strongly to the conclusion that a high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most potent and certainly one of the most potent factors in bringing about change and learning.” – Carl Rogers

For Rogers there are 3 core conditions or capacities or relational attitudes that facilitate the process of student-centered learning, and they all converge on the capacity to be centered on the student in a facilitative way: Being genuine, real or congruent; being nonjudgmental and able to deeply trust and respect the student and believing in their potentialities; and being capable of understanding them with empathy, which create a facilitating climate in the classroom and promote effective learning.

Realness and capacity of contact in the facilitator of learning. When the facilitator/teacher relates to the students as real persons, and maintains a close relationship with the learners without presenting a front or a facade, she/he is much more likely to be effective. This means that the facilitator of learning is congruent, meaning that she/he is in contact with his/her own inner experience, without distorting or negating it in a defensive way: The feelings that she/he is experiencing are available to her/him and she/he is able to live these feelings, be them, and able to communicate them if appropriate in the learning context. It means real capacity for contact and encounter with oneself and the learner on a person-to-person basis. It means that the facilitator of learning has the capacity and the courage to be honest, real and transparent, it also means that the facilitator of learning has a good capacity of contact with himself/herself, others and the world, which indicates a good level of mental health.

A nonjudgmental attitude, acceptance, trust, deep respect for the learner are other core attitudes needed in effective facilitators of learning. It is an attitude of sincere interest and appreciation for the learner, her or his opinions and feelings, a non-possessive caring for the learner, with real acceptance of the other. It is a basic trust, a belief that human nature and the learner are fundamentally trustworthy: so this is for the teacher not just a theory but also her/his existential stance about human beings.

Empathic understanding is the third core competency; the capacity of the teacher to understand the student’s inner experiences, feelings, thoughts and behaviors deeply and to communicate to the learner such empathic understanding in a clear, simple, direct and delicate way.

“.... [Students feel deeply appreciative] when they are simply understood—not evaluated, not judged, simply understood from their own point of view, not the teacher’s.” – Rogers 1967 304-311

The strength of Rogers’ approach lies in part in his focus on facilitative relationships. He explored the notion of student-centred teaching in Client-Centered Therapy (1951: 384-429). There, as Barrett-Lennard (1998: 184) notes, he offers several general principles. These include:

1. We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning.
2. The structure and organization of the self appear to become more rigid under threat.
3. The educational climate which most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which:
 - a. threat to the self of the learner is reduced to a minimum, and
 - b. differentiated perception of the field of experience is facilitated.

All those who had the experience of being a student of Carl Rogers, including myself, deem Carl a gifted teacher. His way of being was always congruent with his theories, he was always candid with us, openly admitting his limitations and mistakes. His paper 'The interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning' is an important statement of this orientation (Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1990).

The purpose of Person-Centered Education is to protect and promote a student's innate creative capacities for learning from their experiences, to promote wholeness and integration in the individual by focusing on the student's personal growth and development of creative and competent members of society, who are able to contribute effectively to the life of their community.

The role of the student-centered teacher is a professional commitment to facilitate learning and to embrace effective, democratic and value-based education. The teacher should also have the capacity to share her/his passion about learning, and relate to students with respect, empathy and congruence.

The teacher needs to be capable of being in touch with herself, her students, the members of her community and the world and have the needed skills and attitudes and motivations to be a facilitator of learning, an effective mentor promoting creativity and autonomy, capable of helping students develop their personal and social skills and not just absorb notions.

Person/Student-Centered educated learners learn much more and better when compared to those who are traditionally educated. They take responsibility for their own personal development, for development of social, personal and problem-solving skills, for learning to learn, for learning from mistakes, for contributing to a cooperative and tolerant school ethos and for learning how to relate to herself/himself and others with respect, empathy and congruence. Student-Centered education promotes self-regulation, by helping students to understand and manage their own learning and to choose worthy and attainable goals (Pintrich, 2000).

David Aspy and Flora Roebuck carried out the largest field study ever done in 42 U.S. states and 7 countries, in the 1970s and 80s, over a 12-year period, focusing on what led students to achievement, creativity, more critical thinking and interactivity, less violence, and more teacher and student satisfaction. Their research supported the earlier findings of Carl Rogers': the most effective teachers were empathic, caring or prizing their students, and were authentic or genuine in their classroom (Aspy and Roebuck, 1977, 1983).

Reinhard and Anne Marie Taush replicated the research in large numbers of classrooms in Germany and showed similar positive findings (Tausch & Tausch 1963/1998).

In 2007 Cornelius-White and in 2010 Jeffrey Cornelius-White and Adam Harbaugh published a very large meta-analysis on learner-centered education including in their analysis the studies on person-centered or humanistic education done since 1948. Their findings also corroborated the earlier findings of Carl Rogers and of Aspy and Roebuck, underlining the fact that a student-centered education that fosters learner-centered instructions works better than traditional education, facilitates positive results with students of different gender, ethnicity and cultures. Further research has confirmed the positive results (Cornelius-White, 2007); (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010); (Anyanwu & Iwuamadi, 2015); (Requena-Carrion, et al. 2010).

Among the positive results are, better achievement of educational goals, better attendance, more student satisfaction, better morale, better self-image, more critical thinking, better problem solving, better relationships between students in the classroom and also outside school hours and less destructive behaviors or dropouts. (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010). What is relevant is that person/student-centered education has positive effects on all levels and grades of education (Kember, 2009), and also shows excellent results when applied to so called “dry” technical fields like molecular biology, biochemistry, pharmacology etc. (Knight & Wood, 2005); (Kemmer & Dantas, 2007); (Costa, 2014), or when one is using the new computer assisted hybrid or e-learning forms of educational offerings (Motschnig-Pitrik & Derntl, 2002).

Of no secondary importance are the facts that ineffective education imposes serious costs to individual citizens, their families, communities and nations and that more and more of these relevant socio-economic costs as well as the gains derived from improving education are scientifically assessed (KPMG Foundation, 2006); (OECD 2010).

The need to redesign policies and practices in education and better train the teachers has been underlined by many authors for a long time: (Dewey, 1897, 1924); (Montessori, 1912, 1914, 1936); (Freire, 1970); (Rogers, 1965, 1969, 1977, 1980, 1983); (Foucault, 1980); (Lambert & McCombs, 1997); (Morin, 2001, 2007a, 2007b); (Levine, 2002); (Armstrong, 2012); (McCombs, 2013).

The student-centered approach requires a willingness from teachers to share their power and have more trust in their students’ innate capacity and motivation for learning.

12. Person/Student-Centered Adult Education

“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.” – Rogers 1983 p.20

Research confirms that the person-/student-centered approach is more effective than traditional education even in the case of adult education.

Malcolm Knowles is one of the outstanding figures of adult education who was influenced by the work of Carl Rogers.

Knowles called his approach to adult education “Andragogy”. He was influenced by the ideas and work of Carl Rogers at the University of Chicago, where he was doing his Master’s at the time Rogers was a very popular professor; Knowles enrolled in a seminar under Arthur Shedlin, an associate of Rogers, where he had a significant experience:

“It was exhilarating. I began to sense what it means to get turned on to learning. I began to think about what it means to be a facilitator of learning rather than a teacher” (Knowles, 1984 pp.14).

Jarvis has compiled a comparison of the assumptions of traditional pedagogy and andragogy as formulated by Malcolm Knowles (Jarvis, 1987).

Traditional Pedagogy: The learner is dependent, the teacher directs what, when and how a subject is learned and tests what has been learned.

- The learner’s experience has very little worth. Hence, teaching methods are didactic.
- Readiness to learn: students should learn what society expects them to learn; for this reason the curriculum is standardized.
- Orientation to learning: geared towards the acquisition of subject matter; the curriculum is organized by subjects.

Andragogy: promotes independence, self-direction; the teacher encourages and facilitates self-regulation.

- The learner’s experience is a rich resource for learning. Teaching methods include discussion, brainstorming, problem-solving etc.
- Readiness to learn: People learn what they need to know, so that learning programmes are organized around real life application.
- Orientation to learning: Learning should be based on experiences, since people are performance-centered in their learning.

Knowles based his work on Carl Rogers’ ideas but he was also influenced by Kurt Lewin and others. The following assumptions show how strong the influence of Rogers was on his work:

1. Self-concept: As a person matures his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.
2. Adult Learner Experience: As a person matures he/she accumulates a growing amount of experience that becomes a continuously increasing resource for learning.
3. Readiness to Learn: As a person matures his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.

4. Orientation to Learning: As a person matures his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his/her orientation toward learning shifts from being centered on the topic to being centered on problem solving.
5. Motivation to Learn: As a person matures the motivation to learn becomes internal (Knowles 1984:12).

13. Knowles' 4 Principles of Andragogy

In 1984, Knowles suggested 4 principles of adult learning:

1. Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of instruction received.
2. Experience which includes learning from mistakes, provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact on their job or personal life.
4. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.

14. Application of Andragogy in Personal Computer Training

Knowles' (1984) contributions include andragogy principles for the design of personal computer training:

1. We need to explain the reasons why specific things are being taught.
2. Instruction should be task-oriented instead of promoting learning by rote; learning activities should be in the context of common tasks to be performed.
3. Instruction should take into account the wide range of different backgrounds of learners; learning materials and activities should allow for different levels/types of previous experience with computers.
4. Since adults are self-directed, instruction should allow learners to discover knowledge for themselves without depending on other people; guidance and help will be provided if the learner makes mistakes and asks for help.

Knowles considered adult education as an excellent setting for civic learning, as occasions where people relate to and interact with each other and become useful laboratories of democracy and cooperation.

Knowles stressed that adults need:

- a mature understanding of themselves, their needs, motivations, interests, capacities, and goals. They need to accept and respect themselves for what and who they are, while striving to grow.
- an attitude of acceptance, love, and respect toward themselves and others.

- to learn to distinguish between people and ideas, and to challenge ideas without judging the person.
- to learn to live in the here and now, accepting the fact that change is the ever present reality and develop awareness and the capacity for learning from every experience.
- to learn to react to the causes, and not the symptoms of behavior. Have an understanding that solutions to problems lie in their causes, not in their symptoms.
- to learn how to facilitate their growth and develop their potentialities. This will contribute to their wellbeing and benefit society.
- to actualize one's own potentials requires various relational skills, social, vocational, civic, artistic, and the like. Effective education aims to facilitate learners' potentialities at the bio-psycho-social-spiritual levels.

Furthermore, adults need to understand the essential values of human experience and be familiar with the heritage of knowledge, the great traditions of the world in which they live. They should understand and respect the values that bind communities together.

"It is no longer realistic to define the purpose of education as a mere transmission of what is known to new generations. The main purpose of education must now be to develop the skills of inquiry to learn how to learn."

Adults need to understand social realities, be aware of them and be an active and mature agent of social change.

Knowles stated that there is ample evidence that self-directed learning offers several advantages: people who are proactive learners learn more and better than reactive learners; people who passively wait to be taught "enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation. They also tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer than do the reactive learners" (Knowles 1975: 14).

Self-directed learning is more in tune with the natural processes of psychological development. "An essential aspect of maturing is developing the ability to take increasing responsibility for our own lives—to become increasingly self-directed" (Knowles 1975: 15).

Thirdly, more and more educational programs have placed more responsibility on the learners to be active learners: "Students entering into these programs without having learned the skills of self-directed inquiry will experience anxiety, frustration, and often failure, and so will their teachers" (Knowles 1975: 15).

Furthermore, social reality has been changing at an accelerating pace; it is no longer realistic to define the purpose of education as a mere transmission of what is known to new

generations. The main purpose of education must now be to develop the skills of inquiry to learn how to learn.

Malcolm Knowles proposed a five step model to promote student-centered adult learning:

1. diagnosing learning needs.
2. formulating learning needs.
3. identifying human resources for learning.
4. choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies.
5. evaluating learning outcomes.

Knowles was the first to chart the rise of the adult education movement in the United States, the first to develop a statement of informal adult education practice and the first to attempt a comprehensive theory of adult education. He was an innovator and a key figure in adult education throughout the Western world in the XX century (Jarvis 1987: 185).

There are several barriers to the restructuring of the field of traditional education and those barriers are to be identified, understood and resolved if the efforts to promote a more effective education are to be successful.

The goal is to improve our education system in order to be able to offer a more effective education, an education based on reality, and which is scientifically grounded on how people learn and develop their potentialities. We need to understand the obstacles and defense mechanisms that impede change and why the factual politics of education are often incongruent with the declared educational goals. Do we have the political will to change obsolete education?

John Dewey eloquently stated that the problem with education is that there are too many teachers and very few facilitators of learning.

The teachers' skills are socially construed, so to promote change effectively it is counterproductive just to criticize teachers for being teacher-centered educators, since society trained them to be so. We need to retool teachers' education and promote change and undertake the training of traditional educators to make them motivated enough to become effective student-centered educators. This process needs to be a promotion of change on a win-win basis. It would be quite incongruent not to consider educators as persons who need to be respected, understood and facilitated in their learning new skills as educators.

We need to understand how effectively learning of educators can be facilitated and how decision makers can become part of the solution, not part of the problem as in obsolete education.

Another way to be person/student-centered is to apply to the field of education the knowledge that is emerging from the advancement of research in neuroscience (Goswami, 2004); (Blakemore & Frith, 2005); (Caine and Caine, 2011); (Brunnhuber, 2016). The emerging field of educational neuroscience is helping us better understand why person/student-centered education is effective; neuroscience research confirms that learning

outcomes are not solely determined by the environment, and that personal/biological factors are also significant variables. Therefore, in order to be effective, education needs to be person-centered, respecting and valorizing individual differences.

Taking the Person-Centered Approach Institute (IACP) as an example, the post-graduate courses there are organized as a learning community where professors and students intentionally create a facilitative climate of learning and collaboratively strive to achieve common goals. Every day there is an encounter group and students can call for a community meeting if they want to address any specific problem or issue.

Exams and assessments are not of the traditional kind: the students orally share in the classroom their written self-evaluation focused on 3 levels of their learning experience: to know, to learn to do and to be. They receive their peers' and the professors' feedback orally. In addition, each professor and tutor receives feedback from the students. The secretaries and the facilities are also evaluated by the students with the use of anonymous questionnaires that the students are asked every time to improve or modify. Suggestions for improvements are given to each professor, tutor and secretary as well as to each facility. The feedback of the students is discussed in a staff meeting after which the course director and the local IACP branch director communicate to the students the changes and improvements that they are willing and able to implement with the students' active involvement.

During written exams, the questions are distributed and at the end of the allotted time the students are asked not to turn in their papers as is done in traditional education, but to take them home and correct them by consulting the literature and then edit their answers if necessary and send their papers to their tutor and professor.

Promoting change cannot be done in a mechanistic reductionist way as Jasanoff (2011) reminds us. Different civic epistemologies shape different responses to anthropogenic changes (Norgaard, 2011): the construction of public knowledge varies from culture to culture and from community to community, different epistemologies and different hermeneutics need to be kept in mind for the promotion of change because what may work in a community may not be automatically effective in another.

In order to be effective, the new paradigm of education should avoid becoming a one way worldview. As it is important to protect the planet's biodiversity, it is also important to protect human creativity and the plurality of narratives and cultures, all united in their common goal and effort to protect and respect all life forms.

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