



Humanism

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Abstract

Humanist philosophies, under different names, have developed in many cultures worldwide over thousands of years. This article discusses the history and basic tenets of humanism as an educational movement. The philosophies of prominent humanists, including Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and John Dewey, are discussed. Instructional strategies based upon humanistic principles are described. Counter philosophies are briefly outlined.

Overview

Humanism is “a philosophy of life inspired by humanity and guided by reason” (Institute for Humanist Studies, n.d.). Humanism “provides the basis for a fulfilling and ethical life without religion.” Humanist philosophies, under different names, have developed in many cultures worldwide over thousands of years.

Humanism as a paradigm, philosophy or pedagogical approach developed in the 1960s in reaction to the psychoanalysis and behaviorism that dominated psychological thought in the first half of the twentieth century. Humanism soon became known as the third force in psychology, leading to the birth of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* in 1961, the formation of the Association of Humanistic Psychology in 1963, and recognition of humanistic psychology as a field by the American Psychological Association in 1971. There are two primary branches of humanism: secular and religious (Huitt, 2000). Secular Humanists believe that individuals have everything they need to grow and develop to their fullest potential. In contrast, Religious Humanists believe that religion plays an important role in human development.

In the educational realm, humanism gained popularity as an alternative to the overly mechanistic approaches to learning and teaching that dominated schools at the time, as well as many cognitive theories of learning and motivation that failed to recognize the importance of student affect in learning (McInerney, 2005). Most learning theories focus on what learning is and how it takes place, focusing on limited aspects of learning such as acquisition, management, and formation of knowledge (Zhou, 2007). These theories neglect the “relevance of learning to the learner as a holistic experience of personal growth” (Zhou, 2007, p. 131). Humanism, in contrast, “is the only learning theory that

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Self-Directed Learning

emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between learning and the learner and the reciprocal relationship between individual actualization and social transformation that make learning a unique human experience” (p. 131).

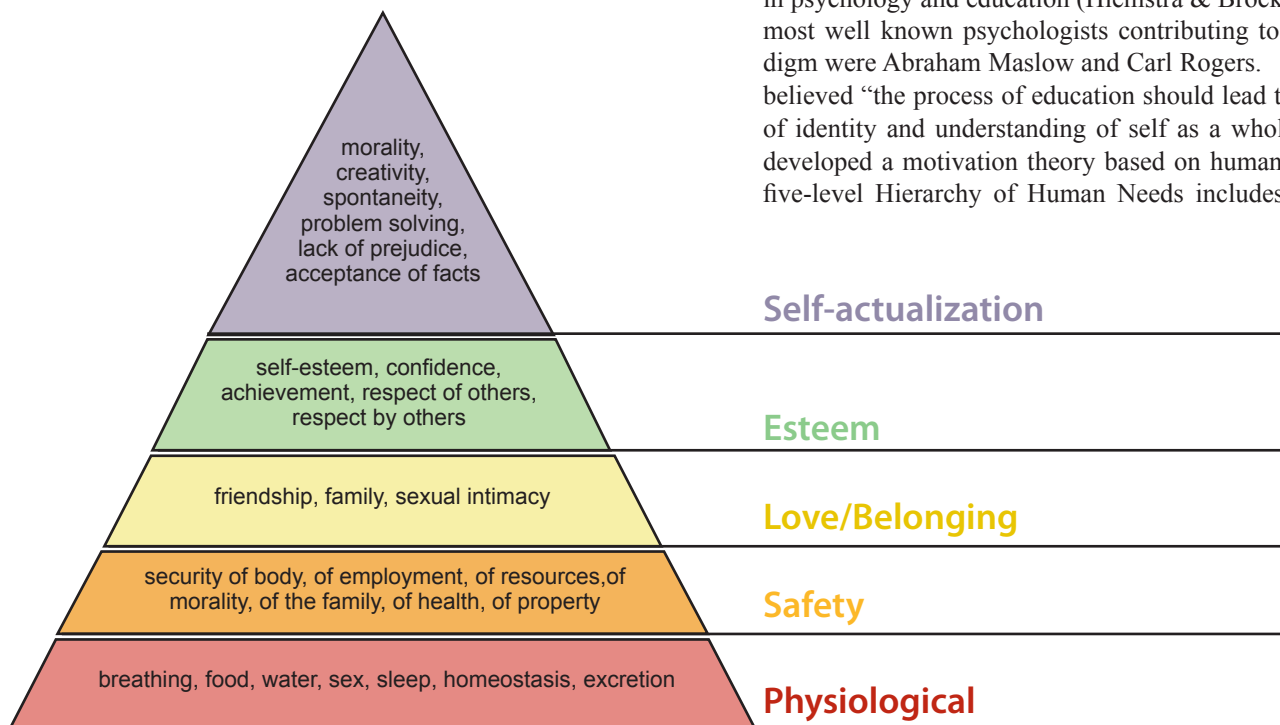
Humanism views education as a method of fulfilling human potential based upon individuals’ needs and interests (“Humanism,” 2007). The humanistic approach emphasizes human freedom, dignity, and potential. It is based on the belief that “human beings are capable of making significant personal choices within the constraints imposed by heredity, personal history, and environment” (Elias & Merriam, 1980, p. 118). Humanist principles are grounded in the following major assumptions:

- Human nature is inherently good;
- Individuals are free and autonomous, thus they are capable of making major personal choices;
- Human potential for growth and development is virtually unlimited;
- Self-concept plays an important role in growth and development;
- Individuals have an urge toward self-actualization;
- Reality is defined by each person; and
- Individuals have responsibility to both themselves and to others (Elias & Merriam, 1980, p. 118).

Rogers & Maslow

These principles provided the foundation for major developments in psychology and education (Hiemstra & Brockett, 1994). The most well known psychologists contributing to this new paradigm were Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Maslow (1970) believed “the process of education should lead to the discovery of identity and understanding of self as a whole person.” He developed a motivation theory based on human needs, and his five-level Hierarchy of Human Needs includes physiological/

Figure 1
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



(From Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed., Harper & Row, 1970)

biological needs, safety, belonging and love, need for esteem and self-actualization. Only when lower, more basic order needs are satisfied are individuals capable of attending to higher order needs. On the other hand, if the things that meet the needs disappear, individuals are no longer concerned with higher order needs. For example, children who have witnessed a violent act such as a school shooting and consequently fear for their safety are incapable of learning until they are assured they are safe.

Carl Rogers (1961) developed the concept of “client-centered therapy” designed to help clients develop greater-self-direction. Humanistic education is based on similar ideas. Patterson (1973) believed “the purpose of education is to develop self-actualizing persons” (p. 22). Valett (1977) defined the purpose of humanistic education as the development of “individuals who will be able to live joyous, humane, and meaningful lives” (p. 12).

Humanistic Education

Humanistic education seeks to offer a starting foundation for individual growth and development that allows individuals to learn throughout their lives in a self-directed way (DeCarvalho, 1991). In humanism, education is given on an individual and personal basis, allowing the students to be the center of attention (Ediger, 2006). Education of the whole child is emphasized, and learning is considered a “personal growth experience” (Lamm, 1972). Testing may measure specific learning but humanists believe there are many other ways to evaluate learning (Ediger, 2006). Multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1991) are recognized and celebrated. Because of their diverse skills, talents, abilities, all students should not be held accountable to the same standards.

The major goals of humanistic education are to:

- Accept the learner’s needs and purposes and create educational experiences and programs for the development of the learner’s unique potential.
- Facilitate the learner’s self-actualization and feelings of personal adequacy.
- Foster the acquisition of basic skills and competencies (e.g., academic, personal, interpersonal, communicative, and economic) for living in a multicultural society.
- Personalize educational decisions and practices.
- Recognize the importance of human feelings, values, and perceptions in the educational process.
- Develop a learning climate that is challenging, understanding, supportive, exciting, and free from threat.
- Develop in learners a genuine concern and respect for the worth of others and skill in resolving conflicts (Tomei, 2004, ¶ 2).

Gage and Berliner (1991) define five basic objectives of the humanistic view of education:

- Promote positive self-direction and independence;
- Develop the ability to take responsibility for what is learned;
- Develop creativity;
- Curiosity; and
- An interest in the arts.

These objectives were developed based upon the following principles (Gage & Berliner, 1991):

- Students will learn best what they want and need to know.
- Knowing how to learn is more important than acquiring a lot of knowledge.
- Self-evaluation is the only meaningful evaluation of a student’s work.
- Feelings are as important as facts.
- Students learn best in a non-threatening environment.

From a humanistic perspective, teachers strive to make learning more responsive to students’ affective (emotions, feelings, values, and attitudes) needs. The focus of teaching is on meeting both the affective and cognitive needs of students to promote their self-actualization in a cooperative, supportive environment (“Humanism,” 2007). Thus, teaching is more than presenting subject matter in an organized way; it also involves helping students “derive personal meaning from the information” so they are motivated to learn (Tomei, 2004). An integrated curriculum, with a strong emphasis on the arts, is generally advocated by humanists (Ediger, 2006).

“There are a variety of ways teachers can implement a humanist approach in their teaching” (Huitt, 2001, ¶ 2). Some of these include:

- Allow students to have a choice in the selection of tasks and activities whenever possible.
- Help students learn to set realistic goals.
- Allow students to participate in group work, especially cooperative learning, in order to develop social and affective skills.
- Act as a facilitator for group discussions when appropriate.
- Act a role model for the attitudes, beliefs and habits you wish to foster in your students, always striving to become a better individual (Huitt, 2001, ¶ 12).
- Although humanism has met with varying degrees of acceptance, Combs’ (1978) rationale for the need for humanistic education still holds true three decades later:
 - Problems facing humans are changing daily. We

have created a very complex and interdependent society. Our primary problems are “no longer physical but human ones.” In order to prepare students who will be capable of solving current and future problems related to the environment, overpopulation, war, etc. will require an educational system that has a “humanistic orientation.”

- The future cannot be predicted. The “information explosion and extraordinary rate of change in modern society” have made it impossible to predict what people will need to know in the future. “New goals for education must be holistic and human. Prime goals must be the development of intelligent behavior, the production of self-propelled, autonomous, creative, problem solving, humane, and caring citizens” (Combs, 1978, p. 301).
- A broader definition of personality to include “mental states and processes” as well as behavior.
- A broader concept of learning that includes not only the conveyance of new knowledge but the personal meaning of information for the individual.
- The importance of the self-concept as a vital part of the learning process.

Pioneers of Humanism

Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers were instrumental in the development of humanistic thought. Their contributions are summarized here.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs has direct application to student learning (Tomei, 2004; Ediger, 2001). For instance, children who are hungry, sleepy, fearful of their safety, have low self-esteem, and/or have untreated health concerns cannot be expected to learn in the classroom.

Definitions of each level and illustrative educational examples are outlined in the following chart. It should be noted that the hierarchy is dynamic and each level does not exist in isolation. Needs change continually and are based on situations. Behaviors may also cross several levels.

Self-Directed Learning

Carl Rogers believed children have a natural desire to learn. He advocated a child-centered curriculum where children could explore freely to satisfy their academic needs without fear of threat or criticism. He believed in students being self-directed learners through development of self reliance and independence (Ediger, 2001). Rogers believed that schools should provide opportunities for students to select and pursue their own educational interests in order to become lifelong learners, and that teachers should serve primarily as facilitators of learning who share the responsibility of learning with their students (Tomei, 2004). He viewed humanistic teachers as both guides and models, providing students with resources to enable them to learn.

Table 1

Needs	Descriptions	Examples
Physiological / Biological	This most basic level includes the most demanding of needs, including hunger, thirst, and the need for shelter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School breakfast program • Social work support to insure adequate food, clothing, and housing for students
Safety	These needs include security, protection from harm, and desire for good health.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of child abuse • Violence prevention programs • Counseling services • Health-related services
Belonging and love	These needs include family and friends and acceptance and friendship in relations with others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative learning • Peer assistance programs • Mentoring • Recognition of student accomplishments • Student input invited in curriculum planning
Need for esteem	This need includes need for self-respect, autonomy, achievement, and recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of student accomplishments • Student input invited in curriculum planning
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student selection in goal setting • Student involvement in evaluation • Teacher-student contracts
Self-actualization	This highest level assumes that lower-level needs have been met; the emphasis at this level is on developing individual potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student confidence that s/he has reached his/her learning potential

Progressive Education

Another well-known humanist was John Dewey, considered the father of the progressive education movement in the United States (Field, 2007). He believed that education should be student-centered, emphasize the student instead of the subject matter, encourage curiosity, and approach the learning process as equally important to what is being learned. Dewey viewed schools as a microcosm of society and felt they should prepare students to become active, cooperative members of society. He believed that self-directed learning is the best way to prepare students for the “demands of responsible membership within the democratic community.”

Applications

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a teaching and learning strategy whereby students work together in small teams on assigned projects (Education Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). Students are evaluated both individually and as a group. For cooperative learning to be effective, five elements must be present (Tomei, 2004);

- Positive interdependence. Students must share common goals, assign tasks, share resources and information, assume responsibility for different roles, and be rewarded based on group performance.
- Face-to-face interaction. Students must discuss tasks, decide how to approach assignments, and problem solve together. “The importance of helping others is stressed.”
- Individual accountability. “Each student must develop a sense of personal responsibility to the group.”
- Collaborative skills. Students need to be taught the necessary skills to work together cooperatively.
- Group processing. Students need to discuss and evaluate their progress and learn how to maintain good working relations among team members.

Research indicates that cooperative learning has a positive effect on student achievement, especially development of interpersonal and social skills (Tomei, 2004).

The Open Classroom

The Open Classroom movement as a humanistic approach to elementary education teaching evolved during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Tomei, 2004). Open classrooms include seven basic components:

- Provisions for learning. Students work with a diverse range of materials. They move about and talk freely in the classroom. Students are not grouped according to ability.
- Humaneness, respect, warmth. Use of student-made materials. Teachers deal with behavior problems by communicating with the student without involving the group.
- Diagnosis of learning events. Students correct their own work while teachers observe and ask questions.
- Individualized instruction. Students have no textbooks or workbooks.
- Individualized evaluation. Teachers take notes and assess students individually. Formal testing is minimal.
- Professional growth. Teachers work with other educators to offer a range of diverse learning opportunities.

- Assumptions about students. The environment is “warm and accepting” while involving students closely in all aspects of learning (Tomei, 2004, ¶ 2).

Research on open education indicates it is effective in improving cooperation, creativity, achievement motivation, and independence, but traditional classrooms are more effective on measures of academic achievement (Tomei, 2004).

Role of Technology

Technology has become an integral part of the learning process for students of the twenty-first century (Zhou, 2007). In keeping with humanistic educational philosophy, technology has the capability of providing opportunities for “self-directed, self-motivated, and self-evaluated” learning experiences. It is a powerful tool that can be used “to facilitate and advance a person’s freedom to learn” (p. 132). In addition to individual learning, technology also provides a collaborative environment that connects online communities of learners worldwide and promotes social interaction.

A Humanistic Approach to Teaching Reading

In contrast to a state-mandated reading curriculum, humanistic education emphasizes a developmental program in which students sequence their own learning (Ediger, 2002). As an example, students have input in selecting a book to read as a group. Under teacher guidance and supervision, the group discusses what they have read. In addition to discussing facts, concepts, and generalizations based upon what they have comprehended, the students engage in critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving. Each student uses his/her individual talents in the creation of a group evaluative project. Each student may also develop an individual portfolio containing a representative sampling of work that documents his/her individual reading achievement. According to Gunning (2000), a rationalization for a humanistic approach to reading instruction includes:

- Motivation for learning to read and reading to learn comes from within the individual student.
- Student interest is a powerful factor in student reading and learning. Giving students a choice increases interest.
- Purpose for reading comes from within the student.
- Sequence of learning comes from within the student.
- Reading achievement and goals come from the student (Gunning, 2000).

Second Language Learning

Second language learning for non-native speakers has been greatly influenced by humanism (Lei, 2007). Second-language teaching is learner-centered, where it is assumed that students learn best when they are treated as individuals with specific needs. Second language teachers create a supportive psychological atmosphere to minimize anxiety and enhance personal security. Both affective and cognitive activities work together to educate the whole student.

Viewpoints

Criticisms of Humanism

Fundamentalists on the religious right criticize humanism for being in conflict with religious principles. In *I, The Christian's Response to Humanism*, Bert Thompson writes: "If there ever existed a formula guaranteed to provide a sin-sick life on this Earth, and a home in hell in the life to come, humanism is it" (Thompson, n.d., p. 11). Thompson asserts that "humanism is not just a system of thought that places a high importance on humans (mankind). Far more than that, humanism is a very subtle, disarming, and sophisticated way of saying 'atheism'" (Thompson, n.d., p. 3).

In *Education and New Age Humanism*, Russ Wise (1995) expresses his concern that:

Humanism is the dominant view among leading educators in the U.S. They set the trends of modern education, develop the curriculum, dispense federal monies, and advise government officials on educational needs. In short, they hold the future in their hands. As Christian taxpayers we are paying for the overthrow of our own position (Wise, 1995, ¶ 12).

Although humanism emphasizes the "here and now," not all humanists deny the autonomy and existence of a god and believe that educators can maintain their religious beliefs while engaging in humanistic education practices (Hiemstra & Brockett, 1994).

A second criticism of humanism is that it is a self-centered approach to life. Humanists counter this argument with the assertion that individuals find self-actualization, in part, by focusing on problems outside of themselves.

Behaviorist B.F. Skinner argued that less teacher control of student learning, as practiced by humanistic educators, does not imply more student control (Tomei, 2004). Skinner felt that less teacher control would result in other conditions controlling student learning and that teachers needed to understand the behavioral process to facilitate learning. Behaviorists also maintain that an emphasis on students' affect is not sufficient for effective instruction, and that placing a higher value on affect than cognition goals may be harmful for both affective and cognitive development. Cognitivists criticize humanistic education for what they perceive is an "absence of clear direction or purpose in the classroom - direction that provides the structure for knowledge to be constructed," thus preventing mastery of basic skills (Tomei, 2004).

Terms & Concepts

Affective: Affective relates to the experience of feeling or emotion in learning.

Behaviorism: Behaviorism is the idea that all behavior is capable of being described in a scientific manner, rather than

taking into account internal processes such as physiological or hypothetical conducts.

Cooperative Learning: Cooperative learning is an instructional method in which students work together in groups to support individual as well as group learning.

Learner-Centered: Learner-centered is a "perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners). This dual focus then informs and drives educational decision making" (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Open Classroom: An open classroom is an educational design formatted to center on the students. Some schools were built without walls between classrooms, a design that was popular in American in the 1970s.

Paradigm: Paradigm refers to "an example that serves as a pattern or model for something, especially one that forms the basis of a methodology or theory" (Encarta World English Dictionary, n.d.).

Progressive Education: Progressive education is an educational movement based on the philosophy of John Dewey that was a reaction to formalism. This educational approach focuses on "democratic ideals, creative and purposeful activity, receptivity to student needs, and interaction with the community" (Education Resources Information Center, n.d.).

Self-Actualization: Self-actualization refers to Maslow's last level of psychological development that can be obtained only if and when all other basic and meta needs are fulfilled. This actualizes the individual's own potential.

Self-Directed Learning: Self-directed learning is "a process in which students take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes. The role of the instructor shifts from being the 'sage on the stage' to the 'guide on the side' in a self-directed learning environment" (Northeast Texas Consortium, n.d.).

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Essay by Susanne Carter, M.S.

Susanne Carter is a retired university grant writer and long-time educator in varied K-16 education settings. She holds a Master of Science in Education and works on various freelance projects.

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