Rogerian Principles and the Writing Classroom:  
A History of Intention and (Mis)Interpretation

During WWII psychologist Carl Rogers introduced a verbal counseling technique that could be utilized by clergy, teachers, and USO workers to help veterans overcome problems of readjustment. Rogers’s arhetorical principles were adapted for the writing classroom by Young, Becker, and Pike—an adaptation that later led composition historian James Berlin to misinterpret the implementation of Rogers’s principles in his study of a WWII communication program. These misinterpretations of Rogers’s original intent have resulted in debate over the rhetorical or arhetorical nature of Rogerian rhetoric and have led to an inaccurate association between Rogerian rhetoric and expressivist and therapeutic writing.

Since its introduction in Young, Becker, and Pike’s 1970 Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, Rogerian rhetoric has been discussed from a variety of rhetorical and pedagogical perspectives, including Aristotelian parallels drawn by Lunsford and Bator, a Burkean critique by Pounds, a feminist analysis provided by Lassner, and several ethical possibilities reviewed by Brent.1 Each of these discussions clearly identifies the roots of Rogerian rhetoric, which began as a form of psychotherapy introduced by Carl Rogers during WWII. What is not often clearly identified, however, is that what Rogers initiated at that time was a strategy for psychotherapy that could easily be practiced by lay persons such as teachers or clergy by simply listening empathetically to anyone who needed to talk about their current problems. Rogers had never considered his psychotherapeutic strategies as a form of argument. It was Young, Becker, and Pike who attempted to tease out the argumentative aspect of Rogers’s theories and apply them to...
persuasion and writing. So in discussing Aristotelian, Burkean, and even feminist applications of Rogers’s initial therapeutic intentions, a rather giant leap has been made from the simple practice of listening empathetically to a contemporary notion of a collaborative form of argument—an alternative to the traditional, agonistic form of argument often taught in writing classrooms.

While Young, Becker, and Pike’s interpretation of Rogers’s ideas as a collaborative form of persuasion has been recognized as a possibility in a face-to-face environment, the authors take their interpretation one step further and attempt to apply their rhetorical theory to the writing classroom. Such an adaptation requires student writers to listen to and empathize with any opposing viewpoints from their readers and to affect the opinions of those readers accordingly. This is a difficult task to accomplish; thus the theoretical adaptation of Young, Becker, and Pike has come under significant criticism from a variety of scholars. Ede recognizes each of the inconsistencies in Young, Becker, and Pike’s interpretations and describes the notion of Rogerian rhetoric as a “distortion of Carl Rogers’s own principles” (40). Even Teich, an advocate of the use of Rogers’s theories in the writing classroom, is quick to acknowledge that “Rogers did not propose a new or alternative rhetoric for composition, although some composition theorists have responded as if he had” (“Rogerian Problem-Solving” 1). These recognitions by Ede and Teich, along with others, have done little to discourage the association of Rogerian principles with rhetoric and writing pedagogy.

Moreover, Rogerian rhetoric has been most associated with expressivist writing pedagogy, a connection originally established by James Berlin in his analysis of writing programs during WWII. Included in his seminal work, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–1985*, is Berlin’s historical treatment of the basic communications course at the University of Denver. Although Maxine Hairston had championed the notion of Rogerian rhetoric as an approach to writing pedagogy shortly after its introduction by Young, Becker, and Pike, it is Berlin’s case study of the Denver program that forges the connection between Rogerian ideals and expressivism and, perhaps more importantly, the connection between Rogers’s concepts and therapeutic writing pedagogy. Because of Berlin’s enormous influence as a scholar and because of the impact of *Rhetoric and Reality* on the field of composition studies, Berlin’s case study of Denver’s communications course becomes an integral part of the evolution of Rogerian rhetoric. The interpretations of Rogers’s concepts by Young, Becker, and Pike had been established for almost two decades by the time Berlin began his overview of WWII communications programs; therefore, it is understandable that he would associate the mention of Rogers’s nondirective counseling techniques used at the University of Denver with a writing classroom and subsequently
assume that such a technique might also involve the notion of writing-as-therapy. In revisiting Berlin’s analysis of the Denver communications program, however, as well as using a contemporaneous view of Rogers’s concepts, it becomes clear that these conclusions were the result of a misinterpretation of the principles of Rogerian nondirective counseling promoted during the WWII era.

While this inquiry is not intended as a disparagement of any earlier researchers, it does intend to respond to Berlin’s statement in *Rhetoric and Reality* that “I do not claim to be definitive. A great deal more needs to be said about this period, and I hope others will be encouraged by this study to do so” (18). With that directional encouragement in mind, this article will re-explore the basic communications course at the University of Denver from a contemporaneous perspective and will examine the ways in which Rogers’s original intentions for his nondirective counseling techniques have been misinterpreted as approaches to written argument, expressivism, and therapeutic writing pedagogy.

**Rogers’s Original Goals**

Carl R. Rogers was a popular psychologist before and during WWII. He received his doctorate from Columbia Teacher’s College in 1931 and in 1940 accepted a position as full professor and clinical psychologist at Ohio State University. Rogers developed what he referred to as a “nondirective” (later named “client centered,” and then “person centered”) form of therapy as an alternative to Freudian psychoanalysis. In a 1940 lecture, “Some Newer Concepts in Psychotherapy,” Rogers first gives an overview of what he regards as some of the older therapeutic techniques—“ordering and forbidding,” “pledges and promises,” “confession and catharsis,” “reassurance and encouragement,” “advice and persuasion,” and “intellectual interpretation”—concluding that all of the approaches are fundamentally based upon the notion that the counselor is the one most competent to decide what are the goals of the individual, and what are the values with which the situation is to be judged. . . . A second basic notion is that, by searching, the counselor can discover techniques which will get the client to the counselor-chosen goal in the most efficient manner. (6)

In contrast to this psychoanalytic, counselor-centered approach, Rogers goes on to explain that the newer approach he is suggesting differs in its fundamental goals in that
[i]t aims directly toward the greater independence and integration of this individual rather than hoping that such results will accrue if the counselor assists in solving the problem. . . . The aim is not to solve the problem, but to assist the individual to grow, so that he can cope with this problem and with later problems. (6–7)

The goal of Rogers’s nondirective counseling technique was to encourage anyone who was anxious, worried, nervous, or “maladjusted” to freely express his feelings in a nonthreatening environment. In talking about his problems, Rogers insisted, a client was able to “explore his situation much more adequately” and was consequently able to “clarify the adjustments which one must make” (Counseling and Psychotherapy 171). Rogers strongly believed that “the individual has an enormous capacity for adaptation and for readjustment” and that “[i]t is this strength within the individual, not the strength within the counselor, upon which we must rely” (A Counseling Viewpoint 9). In order to create a nonthreatening environment in which the client could grow, the counselor needed to be empathetic and understanding but should resist any form of evaluating, judging, or diagnosing the client. Instead, volunteer counselors such as those clergy, USO workers, vocational counselors, and teachers who found themselves frequently in contact with returning veterans and their families were encouraged to use the following nondirective counseling methods.

First, the volunteers were advised to “understand that the behavior of each individual has its understandable causes” (Dealing 5). Even if the volunteer counselor was unable to know this underlying cause, the realization that there was such a cause should be sufficient enough to elicit tolerance for any inappropriate behavior (Dealing 7). Second, volunteer counselors were urged to “build an attitude of acceptance towards individuals,” one that combined “tolerance” and a “warm personal interest” (Dealing 8). Volunteers were also encouraged to see the value of “emotional release” and asked to realize that a noncritical approach to the individual was a “deeply valuable experience” (Dealing 11). Recognizing their limitations, practicing self-restraint, and initiating referrals were three more elements included in the nondirective approach to counseling. But perhaps the most important aspect of this approach was the emphasis on listening. Listening is a theme that was constantly stressed by Rogers as he continued to develop his client-centered theory in later years, and his emphasis on listening is worth a deeper look at this juncture because of its particular relevance to the Denver program, as well as its relevance to my later discussion of Rogerian rhetoric.

Rogers makes a clear distinction between simply listening and listening with understanding:
To listen with understanding means trying to see the situation through the eyes of this other person. It means eliminating one’s own judgment about the situation and trying to understand rather than evaluate. It means to listen without probing into the attitudes and life of the individual. The whole attitude of the volunteer should be described in these terms. “I am listening with interest to what you have to say, and I am trying to understand how these things seem to you.” (Dealing 10)

What is clear from the directions given to volunteers and the justifications provided by Rogers is that neither rhetoric nor writing is involved explicitly in this therapeutic approach. Young, Becker, and Pike, however, in their analysis of a later article by Rogers, conclude that rhetoric is an integral part of Rogers’s theories.

Young, Becker, and Pike’s Interpretation

Dedicating a full chapter of their book to what they term “Rogerian Argument,” Young, Becker, and Pike describe ways in which Rogers’s client-centered therapeutic approach might be used as a rhetorical strategy in writing. Initially, the three authors explain that traditional argument falls short whenever “commitments to values are powerful and emotions run high” but that “an argumentative strategy appropriate to these dyadic situations has been developed, principally by the psychotherapist Carl R. Rogers.” Basing their theory on an article originally presented by Rogers in 1951 titled “Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation,” Young et al. claim that Rogers’s “strategy has only recently been developed to the point that it can be considered an effective alternative to traditional argument” (274). The authors do not enlighten their readers as to who has recently developed this strategy, although according to later articles discussing Rogerian argument, it is Young, Becker, and Pike themselves who are credited with formulating the theory and initiating the subsequent debates that have stemmed from it.

Their new theory of Rogerian argument entails a three-pronged writing strategy aimed at the reader. The first strategy they reveal is “to convey to the reader that he is understood.” The authors continue to describe this strategy in more detail, explaining:

Understanding here means something more than merely a grasp of the basic ideas of the opponent’s position. It goes considerably beyond categorizing the opponent’s position and noting its contrastive
features. In “Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation” Rogers explains that understanding means “to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person’s point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about.” It requires empathy, requires getting inside the other person’s skin and seeing the world through his eyes, or, to speak less metaphorically, it requires considering the beliefs and perspectives of the reader in the context of his attitudes, values, and past experience. (275)

What Young et al. omit from this quote is the preceding sentence by Rogers that specifically states, “Real communication occurs, and this evaluative tendency is avoided, when we listen with understanding” (Rogers, qtd. in Young et al. 285, emphasis added). Notice in that preceding sentence the important word listen. Rogers is advocating that an audience (another person or a group) understands through listening. In regard to this statement by Rogers, then, and in conjunction with the strategy advocated by Young et al., it must be asked, “How can a writer listen with understanding to a reader’s point of view?” Unless the writer is intimately associated with the reader, he or she could, at the very least, make an informed guess as to the reader’s perspective. However, the writer, unless the reader is present, cannot listen for an understanding of “how it seems to him [the reader],” cannot listen for “its personal meaning for him [the reader],” or “sense the emotional flavor which it has for him [the reader]” (Rogers qtd. in Young et al. 286).

Young, Becker, and Pike eventually admit:

Rogerian argument avoids conventional techniques[6] and structures because they tend to be threat-producing. This absence of conventional structures, however, is more characteristic of oral argument than of written. Written argument excludes the possibility of continual readjustment of the discourse as a result of observing the opponent’s reactions. Your opponent cannot show you where you have failed to state his position adequately and give you an opportunity to modify your statement before continuing discussion. In written argument, then, especially great care must be taken to state his position well the first time. (283)

Despite this admission, Young et al. have managed to impose not only an argumentative element but also a writing element onto what was designed and intended as a practical, face-to-face approach to therapy. Rogers himself specifically points
out the limitations of such an approach, lamenting, “Thus far all our experience has been with small face-to-face groups—groups exhibiting industrial tensions, religious tensions, racial tensions, and therapy groups in which many personal tensions are present.” Rogers also questions the validity of this approach in achieving “understanding between larger groups that are geographically remote,” but nowhere does he advocate writing as a possible solution to the limitations of his approach (qtd. in Young et al. 287–88).

Berlin’s Interpretation

As a scholar of composition and rhetoric in the 1980s, Berlin would have been familiar with Young, Becker, and Pike’s 1970 interpretation of Rogers’s theories and, quite understandably, would have easily associated a Rogerian approach with writing and writing pedagogy. It is also likely that Berlin, like many of today’s composition scholars, would not have been thoroughly aware of the original intent and practical applications of Rogers’s concepts—a context essential for a more accurate interpretation of their application during WWII. It is therefore not too remarkable that Berlin would mistakenly associate Denver’s use of a “Rogerian nondirective approach” as a therapeutic writing pedagogy. In addition to this, Berlin also examines the basic communications course at the University of Denver through the lens of several articles published by Denver faculty at the time, and each of these articles is replete with the then-popular vocabulary of general semantics as well as the faculty’s contemporaneous terminology for the university programs. In interpreting a Rogerian approach as a form of writing (as Young et al. had already done) and some of the general semantics vocabulary as psychological terms (an easy mistake which is explained below), Berlin becomes convinced that Denver’s communications course fostered a therapeutic approach to writing pedagogy and that the “Rogerian nondirective approach to the writing class eventually affected expressionistic rhetoric” (104).

According to the articles written by Denver faculty Sorenson, Frederick, Davidson, Murray, and Paul, however, Denver’s main interest was not a therapeutic one. Like many other colleges in the United States in the 1940s, Denver was attempting to develop a program that they believed would promote effective communication, which in turn would help to prevent another catastrophic world war. One of the faculty members’ articles, published in 1946, first describes the pedagogy and function of the required communications course at the University of Denver and then specifically states,

A fundamental assumption of those most intimately concerned with planning the Basic Communications program at the University of
Denver is that we have but little time to revise or revamp the program of education in the United States in such a way that a generation of world-citizens can be produced who will be intelligent enough to avoid World War III. (Paul, Sorensen, and Murray 244)

In order to reach this goal, the faculty at Denver utilized three popular theories of the era: general semantics, We-Psychology, and Rogerian nondirective counseling. Evidence discussed in this article from several of Rogers’s publications and from historical evidence of pedagogical approaches at that time shows that the basic communications course at Denver was a prime example of the way Rogers intended nondirective counseling to be utilized. Popular during this period of scant professors and burgeoning enrollments, communications courses combined the areas of speech, writing, and reading into one program. Rogerian nondirective counseling is explicitly mentioned by Davidson and Sorensen, two of the faculty who taught sections of Denver’s basic communications course. In their 1946 article they explain:

[W]ork in the writing clinic is built upon the foundation of Rogerian nondirective counseling. It is felt that the student who considers himself a non-writer is blocked by fears similar to stage fright in the speaking situation. It is the task of the various clinics to find (if possible) the causes of the student’s particular blockages and to help him to overcome them. (84)

Berlin also cites this quote in full (100) and follows the quote with his conclusion that

[d]ifficulties in writing were seen not as an indication of the failure of the high school to provide necessary skills (as the current-traditionalist would have argued) but as the result of psychic disorders. The solution, then, was to be found not in remediation alone but in remediation coupled with therapy—the writing teacher as therapist. Thus, teachers at Denver, as mentioned above, were called “clinicians” and were usually graduate students in English or speech working for a master’s degree. (101)

Given the inclusion of the terms Rogerian nondirective counseling, blockage, clinics, and clinicians in one small paragraph, it is easy to understand (from a contemporary perspective) how Denver’s basic communications course might be misconstrued as therapeutic in nature; however, an examination of these terms
Rogerian Principles and the Writing Classroom

in the context understood by a reader during the era of WWII will provide a quite different perspective. For example, the term *clinic* refers to a place where students could go for individualized assistance in improving their communications skills (writing, reading, and speaking) and was similar to the learning center in most US colleges today. Utilized by many universities during the late 1930s and the 1940s, these clinics (sometimes referred to as laboratories then, or “labs” today) were usually staffed by graduate students who provided the students with individual help. In the above quote, then, the Rogerian nondirective approach is not suggested for actual classroom practices but for the one-on-one attention students would receive in the writing clinic. This face-to-face approach specifically follows the design advocated by the then-popular Carl Rogers.

In 1945, as Director of Counseling Services for the USO (United Services Organizations, Inc.), Rogers published two pamphlets, *A Counseling Viewpoint for the USO Worker* and *Dealing with Individuals in the USO*, and one book, *Counseling with Returned Servicemen*. All three publications explain in great detail how his nondirective therapeutic approach can be applied to veterans of WWII, and all three can also shed light on how the faculty from the communications program at Denver might have viewed their role in helping the individual (in this case, the student) “grow” and “adjust.”

In each of these three publications Rogers clearly outlines the various problematic situations encountered at the time:

There is the homesick and lonely inductee; there is the serviceman who is perplexed as to whether or not to get married; there is the servicewoman who is deeply upset because her engagement has been broken; there is the man who is concerned about his wife’s behavior while he is far from home; there are the returned servicemen, often bitterly resentful in regard to civilian life and confused as to their own aims and purposes; there are the wounded and handicapped individuals who, in spite of good medical care, feel deeply insecure as they endeavor to face the world; there are the psycho-neurotic[10] individuals whose conflicts and instabilities bring them often to the civilian individual in whom they feel confident. (A Counseling 3–4)

And these types of problems must have seemed relatively insignificant in comparison to the psychological problems spawned by the emotional trauma of combat or the trauma of tending to the wounded and dead.

None of these situations could have gone unnoticed by the faculty and administration at the University of Denver especially when, like other American colleges during and shortly after WWII, their enrollment had doubled. It is not
unlikely, then, that the creators of the required communications course at Denver would feel the need to follow Rogers’s advice on dealing with the personal adjustment of veterans and even believe themselves justified and qualified to do so, especially in regard to the following stance by Rogers:

The statement is sometimes made that such problems of personal adjustment should be referred to psychiatrists, psychologists, or social case workers. This advice does not take into account the facts of our present war situation. There is not a sufficient number of these professionally qualified people to handle the multitude of personal adjustment problems which have arisen. Their trained services should be reserved for the more serious cases. The basic question is whether there are types of counseling assistance which may be rendered by the USO worker, the clergyman, the teacher, the industrial counselor, to the individual whose problem is not extreme, and to the severely maladjusted individual as a step in referring him to qualified therapists. (A Counseling 4)

In light of this statement, the methods used in Denver’s basic communications course were not “extreme,” but were simply an ingenious way for a group of teachers to implement the proposals put forth by Rogers.

One example of the application of Rogerian counseling techniques is described in detail in a master’s thesis written by a graduate instructor in the University of Denver’s basic communications course during the 1946–47 school year, Dorothy Baker. Baker was not merely a clinician in the writing clinic, as some other graduate students were, but also an instructor in one of the writing courses, and she therefore explains the approach from an instructor’s perspective:

Counseling generally took the form advocated by Carl R. Rogers in his book, Counseling and Psychotherapy. It was the policy of the instructor to let the student take the lead and talk out whatever he had on his mind. Frequently he solved his own problem in the telling. (28)

Based on this account, it is likely that Baker is using the specific techniques described in Counseling and Psychotherapy, which advocates restating and clarifying the client’s feelings and occasionally asking specific questions aimed at getting information (124). Rogers also uses the word interview in this book to describe counseling sessions, a word repeated by Baker: “Interviews were conducted in unoccupied classrooms on the campus at irregular intervals and not according to any set pattern” (27–28). She adds that she also made it a habit to
arrive in the classroom early so that students who might need to talk to her had an opportunity to do so and that “[n]ot only could personal problems be discussed, but difficulties with assignments be ironed out” (28). Baker’s use of “could” in this quotation emphasizes the voluntary nature of Rogers’s approach to counseling, and the quotation also shows that interviews were used to help resolve difficulties with assignments. This description is reminiscent of student conferences held by a majority of present-day composition instructors, and although some such conferences result in students divulging personal problems such as drug abuse, pregnancy, difficult relationships, and so forth, rather than the teacher acting as therapist, instructors usually handle them in a similar “Rogerian” fashion to Baker—that is, in severe cases students are referred (often personally accompanied) to an appropriate counseling center on campus or, in less severe circumstances, they are listened to empathetically.

The misunderstanding of the ways in which Rogers’s theories were implemented at this critical time of war, together with a misinterpretation of the contemporaneous terminology for university resources, help to explain several assumptions that have been made by recent composition scholars. But general semantics terms such as blockages also help to compound these misunderstandings, and while it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the theory of general semantics and its application in the writing classroom, the term blockage was used frequently by the two men responsible for the popularization of general semantics, Korzybski and Hayakawa, as well as by its numerous other practitioners. A definition in the footnote to one article published by the Denver faculty reads: “Blockage is here used to refer to affective or emotional behavior which results from inadequate data and strongly established prejudices, feelings, etc.” But a further explanation is included within the body of the text itself, which discloses two types of blockages: “[F]irst, sense organ and physical abnormalities and other neurological defects which interfere with ‘normal perception’; second, semantic blockages” (Paul et al. 234). Rather than referring to any type of psychological blockage, the general semantics term relates to physical problems that might interfere with delivery of a speech (that is, stuttering or hearing impairment) and strong connotations with individual words due to either previous experiences or lack thereof. The term blockages, therefore, was a reference to blocks in effective communication.

Because of the popularity of general semantics (even with the general public of the time), the faculty at Denver would have naturally assumed that their audience, particularly an audience of English and speech scholars, would have a good understanding of the general semantics terminology used in their articles. Later scholars, however, including scholars only forty years later, would not have as intimate an understanding of general semantics terminology,
university structure, or the contemporaneous implementation of Rogers’s principles.

In vigilant adherence to those principles, Davidson and Sorenson are careful to inform their readers that “[s]tudents whose problems go beyond the depth of the clinics are sent to the psychiatrist” (84). The authors then reiterate: “In the serious cases, we leave this aspect of the course to the psychiatrist. And we do everything in our power to avoid treating anyone as neurotic or abnormal” (86). Based upon these statements, it is obvious that neither the instructors nor the “clinicians” at the Denver program were taking on the role of therapist. That they felt confident in their abilities as counselors for minor problems, however, probably stemmed from Rogers’s opinion that in the nondirective approach to counseling, the counselor’s only role was to provide an atmosphere that allowed the client to find his or her own solutions and that therefore “the risk to the client is very slight indeed” (Counseling and Psychotherapy 6). But again, Rogers’s principles were not intended as a pedagogical tool for the writing classroom, or as a form of rhetorical strategy.

Applications of “Rogerian Argument” in the Writing Classroom

Rogers’s design for his nondirective counseling was not originally intended as either a formula for writing or as a form of rhetoric, but since the inclusion of his ideas in Young, Becker, and Pike’s treatise, and despite the arhetorical nature of Rogers’s principles, scholars seem drawn to the possibilities of Rogers’s ideals as an alternative to the agonistic form of argument usually taught in writing classrooms. But even the staunchest supporters of using Rogerian principles for writing admit to the difficulties and restrictions involved in using his techniques. For example, both Hairston and Teich recommend introducing Rogerian argument only to those students who already have a good grasp of rhetorical strategies and writing skills and restricting the writing assignments to pro/con arguments wherein students are asked to write a restatement and clarification of an opponent’s viewpoint. According to Teich, these assignments will “provide opportunities for students to develop their empathetic understanding by imaginatively attempting to walk some distance in another’s shoes” (“Rogerian Problem-Solving” 9–10). Despite the laudable reasons Hairston and Teich cite for promoting Rogerian principles to writing pedagogy, what they are describing as the role for students is the same role that Rogers describes for the volunteer counselor—someone who is able to listen with empathy and understanding to the experiences of others. This is an entirely different role than the communicative role of the client who is seeking a resolution to his or her problems.
In keeping with the self-discovery model proposed by Rogers, however, Kay Halasek agrees with Berlin’s statement that expressivists “relied on the ‘self-actualizing’ psychology of Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers” (Berlin qtd. in Halasek 145) and claims that expressivist practitioners such as Donald Murray and Donald Stewart emphasize the Rogerian principles of “self-exploration and self-affirmation as the goals of the writing course” (145). While there are several parallels that might be drawn between an expressivist, student-centered (client-centered?) writing pedagogy and Rogerian principles, what Halasek ignores is the fundamental goal of any writing classroom—the eventual production of writing capable of effectively communicating to an absent audience over a geographical and historical distance.

Even though Halasek’s analysis is supported by sources from Rogers published after 1961 (more than ten years after the final offering of the basic communications course at the University of Denver), in a 1985 interview, when asked “What can you say about the use of empathy from the perspective of written communication?” Rogers himself admits that written communication “has never been a primary interest of mine” (qtd. in Teich “Conversation” 58). However, when pressed further, Rogers elaborates a little more, giving the following example:

If I get a quite emotional letter, I try to go through it to figure out what this person is feeling. What are the strongest feelings? Then I write a letter in which I recognize and accept these feelings. I do not try to argue the feelings down. . . . I think that by showing a nonjudgmental acceptance of their feelings, it makes them more able to read about my feelings, which may be quite different. Because, when we don’t feel understood, we’re defensive. (qtd. in Teich “Conversation” 59)

Rogers’s quotation does not provide any practical insight into ways of applying his strategy to writing pedagogy, but the sort of unconditional acceptance Rogers mentions is reminiscent of Peter Elbow’s “Believing Game.” Elbow is perhaps one of the most well known of what has come to be termed “expressivists,”12 and the “Believing Game” is first discussed in his book Writing Without Teachers.13 It is a game designed for small groups in an oral setting, and it encourages a willingness on the part of the reader in a peer-review group to fully believe what the writer has written. Although this tactic may initially seem to contradict the purpose of peer review, wherein the reader might help the writer gain insights into his or her not-quite-so-perfect writing, Elbow describes the validity of such an approach in these terms:
Whenever I really changed my mind, there was always something else that had to happen before I would stop fighting, admit error, and in fact really change my mind—instead of just going through the motions. That something else is a bit mysterious, but I can say something about when it happens most and what it feels like. It happens most when the person arguing against me lets up on his guns a little, stops trying to show that I’m an idiot, and in fact shows some glimmer of understanding for why I believe what I do believe. He shows a bit of willingness to share my perception: then I’m more willing to share his. (*Writing Without Teachers* 185)

Elbow here distinguishes the reciprocal nature of the “Believing Game,” and it is this reciprocal nature that is at the heart of Rogers’s principles for counseling. Elbow explores these ideas even further in “The Uses of Binary Thinking” where he proposes that this reciprocal type of discourse is not rhetoric at all, but dialectic—a tradition that “sees value in accepting, putting up with, indeed seeking the nonresolution of the two terms: not feeling that the opposites must somehow be reconciled” (1). Citing Burke’s characterization of rhetoric as language “that is trying to have an effect on an audience” and language “that is ‘addressed’” (16), Elbow distinguishes dialectic as constituting a use of language where the goal is not to have an effect on readers—language is not addressed. Or putting it positively, dialectic means the use of language . . . where the goal is “figuring out” or “figuring” (as with numbers), doing calculations; even language as play. The central thing, then, is that we are using language in such a way that there is not the pressure that is imposed by “address,” the attempt at effect, and audience—the pressure of rhetoric. (16)

Elbow admits that as he extrapolates the possibility that dialectic is arhetorical, he is “being speculative and exploratory” (16). But it is within the context of the oral, small-group, and arhetorical dialectic presented by Elbow’s “Believing Game” that Rogers’s principles find their most appropriate home in the writing classroom.

In expanding Rogers’s principles beyond the writing classroom, however, Doug Brent sees their rhetorical potential by reasoning:

The most difficult challenge facing a Rogerian rhetoric, that of bringing it to bear on the world of print, can be partially solved by
thinking of print as dialogic, not just in its initial stages when the writer is forming her ideas with the aid of others physically present, but also in the much larger sense that every text is informed by, and is a reply to, countless others that have gone before. By adopting the Rogerian frame of mind in his writing, a writer will be encouraged to explore honestly the regions of validity in other texts, to treat them as complex works of another human mind and to try to express as clearly as possible in his own writing the ideas to which he is replying. (464)

Brent reminds us that away from an oral, small-group environment and faced with the conundrum of listening empathetically to the printed word, we are forced to move from dialectic to dialogic and from expression to address.

In response to Brent’s logic and in keeping with Rogerian principles, I hope that in this exploration of print ranging from the 1940s to the 1990s I have been able to describe some of those complex workings of other human minds and, in an effort to tease out what Berlin might term “differences in epistemology,” explain how Carl Rogers’s nondirective counseling techniques have become associated with rhetoric and therapeutic writing (3). The disconnect between Rogers’s original intentions and later interpretations of his techniques helps to explain why “Rogerian Rhetoric” is continually reassessed and reinterpreted as an argumentative strategy and a pedagogical tool. In a final acknowledgement of the ideas of both Rogers and Berlin, it seems fitting here to include a quote from Donald Stewart in his foreword to *Rhetoric and Reality* where he points out that “[t]he scope of this project is huge and the author’s coverage stunning” (x). Stewart also adds, “Not everyone will agree with all the details of his [Berlin’s] map—I do not even agree with all of them myself—but those disagreements are superficial” (xi). Superficial or not, the dialogic of print continues.

Notes

1My thanks to *RR* reviewers Paul Bator and Janice Lauer for their detailed and helpful revision recommendations, and to my colleagues Robin Veder and Mary Richards for their generous advice on early drafts.

2*Rhetoric and Reality* is required reading for many PhD programs in rhetoric and composition and as such has informed, and continues to inform, a majority of scholars in the field. Sharon Crowley cites *Rhetoric and Reality* as the source for her statement that “[o]ne truly radical communication skills program . . . was implemented at the University of Denver” (Composition 172). And David Russell refers to *Rhetoric and Reality* several times in support of his treatment of communications courses and expressivist writing instruction.
Although Young, Becker, and Pike defer to Anatol Rapoport’s *Fights, Games and Debates* as a foundation for their theory, Rapoport is rarely mentioned as the initiator of either the strategies for or the terms Rogerian argument or Rogerian rhetoric.

See Halasek; Bator; Hairston; and Ede.

It is now (many years following the publication of the Rogers and Young et al.’s discussion) possible for Rogers’s strategy of “listening” to a reader’s point of view to succeed in a synchronous online chat environment, where a writer has a present/absent audience, and the reader is capable of presenting immediate feedback to the writer.

Young, Becker, and Pike insist that the other two prongs of their Rogerian argument strategy for writers are an alternative to conventional argument, but their proposal of delineating “the area within which he believes the reader’s position to be valid” and convincing the reader that he and the writer have “moral qualities (honesty, integrity, and good will)” in common seem little more than a watered-down version of Aristotle’s very conventional appeal to *ethos* (275).

Rogers did later validate his person-centered approach through the formation of the Carl Rogers Institute for Peace, an organization that helped ease social tensions in such troubled areas as Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Central America. Perhaps it was this successful approach to social and political conflict resolution that initially attracted Young et al. to Rogers’s principles and convinced them to attempt an adaptation of those same principles as an alternative to the agonistic type of argument taught in the writing classroom.

The conventions of the Institute of General Semantics state that the term *general semantics* is not capitalized.

In his introductory chapter to *Rhetoric and Reality*, Berlin does identify the use of general semantics as “a device for propaganda analysis” (10) and does give Denver credit for promoting “cooperative rather then competitive thinking” (101).

Brigadier General Elliot D. Cooke conducted a study for the War Department in the spring of 1943 and concluded that “nearly as many men were being discharged from the Army as were entering through induction stations” due to “a thing called psychoneurosis” (11). By 1946 at least 40 percent of men receiving pensions for a physical disability were labeled as psychoneurotics, but only 10 percent of that 40 percent had seen combat.

Archival evidence from the University of Denver reveals that enrollment rose “by 57 percent compared to the pre-war enrollments of 1939” and “the percent of Veterans on campus rose to 60 percent” (Zazzarino).

Elbow sees the terms *expressivist* or *expressionist* as problematic and credits them both as terms of “disapproval” coined by Berlin. In defining the terms as “writing that expresses what I feel, see, think,” Elbow concludes that they are “indistinguishable from any other kind of writing” (“Binary Thinking” 20).

See also Halasek for an insightful analysis of ways in which Elbow’s “Believing Game” can be applied to Rogerian principles.

**Works Cited**


Teich, Nathaniel. “Conversation with Carl Rogers.” Teich 55–64.


Julie Kearney is Assistant Professor of English Composition at Penn State Harrisburg, where she teaches courses in rhetoric, writing, and writing theory. Her research focuses on the unconscious aspects of writing and the physiological and psychological benefits writing can produce.