

# One Educator's Invitational Journey in Higher Education and Beyond

by Jim O'Connor

Invitational Education, what a great concept! Focusing on the joy and love of learning, how very exciting! I always loved my teachers. Year after year, in elementary school, middle school, and high school, I was fortunate enough to have wonderful teachers who often took a personal interest in me. As a 12-year-old, I was torn about my future. I wanted to be a surgeon. I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to be a radio broadcaster.

This is a story of my career journey spanning a time period in excess of 50 years. The purpose is to share how my career path has been influenced and affected by the principles of Invitational Education, even prior to the formalization of the International Alliance for Invitational Education as an organization. The reader will hopefully understand, as I move from teaching high school, to college, to eventually serving as Dean at Touro University California, the tremendous impact that Invitational Education and the work of William Purkey and Carl Rogers have had on my professional development.

As stated in the preface of the book entitled *Fundamentals of Invitational Education* (Purkey & Novak, 2008), Invitational Education “is a theory of practice. It is designed to create, maintain, and enhance human environments that cordially summon people to realize their potential in all areas of worthwhile human endeavor” (p. vii). “Ideally, the factors of people, places, policies, programs and processes should be intentionally inviting as to create a world in which each individual is cordially summoned to develop intellectually, socially, physically, emotionally, and morally” (Purkey & Novak, 2008, p. vii).

As you will see from the story about my life as an educator, the tenets of Invitational Education have been central to my professional and personal growth and development.

## **High School**

When I entered high school, I joined Future Teachers of America (FTA). At least once a year, maybe twice, FTA members were dismissed from our regularly scheduled classes and assigned to a teacher at the middle school or elementary school, and we actually got to experience teaching.

In high school, my favorite subject was biology. I loved this subject because we were always “doing” something: conducting experiments, dissecting animals, looking through microscopes. After taking biology my sophomore year in high school, I asked my biology teacher, Mr. Berg, if I could be his lab assistant. Not only did this get me out of going to study hall, it provided me with many teaching-related experiences, including everything from grading papers to cleaning out animal cages to washing test tubes. When Mr. Berg ended up in the hospital with an injured back during my senior year, much to my surprise, the school principal

pulled me out of my classes and had me teach Mr. Berg's schedule for over a week while he was recuperating. What a great experience! The only downside was that my younger and more rowdy brother was a student in one of the classes, and he wasted no time testing my authority daily. Of course, today, with all of the new laws and lawsuits, something like this would never happen, but it did for me in rural Ohio in 1965.

## **My Undergraduate Years**

I started my undergraduate education intending to become a medical doctor. However, as a result of my youthful lack of motivation, sitting passively through chemistry lectures and being more interested in my work as an orderly at the local hospital, my grades were probably not high enough to get into medical school. Besides, I was much more interested in working as a surgical orderly in the local hospital than looking at chick embryo slides in my five-morning-a-week embryology course. The fact is, I have always been interested in "doing." As the reality of my dismal grades indicated—as well as the looming threat of being drafted to go to Viet Nam—I made the decision to switch majors to education. I would be a high school biology teacher.

My college courses in education were hardly engaging. For example, I remember the painful monotony of my "Testing and Measurements" course. However, one course did grab my attention, believe it or not—"The Philosophy of Education." Why? Well, it was in this class that I was introduced to the book *Death at an Early Age*, by Jonathon Kozol. Kozol's detailed account of his visits to poverty-stricken, underserved schools in the 1960s got my attention and would ultimately inspire me to work with at-risk students. Also, Kozol's writing was about real-world problems, not the theoretical material I was learning in most of my teacher preparation courses.

The ultimate experience in my teacher education program was my student teaching assignment in a small farm town in rural northwestern Ohio in 1969. I was assigned to two mentor teachers, Max Swasick and Larry Elsie. I had the opportunity to teach chemistry, general science, and biology to high school students. Both Swasick and Elsie gave me license to experiment with my teaching techniques and pedagogical style. Because of my personality and own learning style, I was eager to get students doing things, rather than being passive receptors of information. I made a lot of mistakes during student teaching, but overall, it was a positive experience that buoyed my confidence that someday I could be a good teacher.

Because I changed majors late in my undergraduate career, I needed to go one extra semester, thus graduating in December. It was my luck that I was informed about a high school teaching position that was open mid-year to replace a popular, veteran teacher who had undergone open-heart surgery. On a cold winter day, I drove south to a small rural farming community in northwestern Ohio, where I interviewed for a science teaching position at the fairly modern consolidated high school. While I was being interviewed by the somewhat intimidating school principal (an ex-Marine), another person just walked into the principal's

office where the interview was taking place and took a seat without introducing himself. The way the man was dressed, I thought he was a custodian. He was extremely obese and was wearing a brown shirt, with enormous sweat marks halfway down his torso. Finally, after 10 minutes or so, he introduced himself as the school superintendent and asked, with a rural Appalachian twang, “How good are you?” Being the brash, newly confident 21-year-old, I replied, “If you hire me, you will hire the best teacher to graduate from Bowling Green State University this year.” He responded, “You don’t have to get sickening about it.”

### **My First Teaching Job**

Well, they hired me. They wanted me to start right away, even before I graduated. I took the job for \$4,820 per year. My assignment was to teach one section of “special ed” biology, two sections of “regular biology (BSCS Green Version),” one section of BSCS Yellow Version advanced biology, and two sections of chemistry. Four preps a day, no problem.

For those of you not familiar with BSCS biology, here is a quick history lesson. Soon after receiving a National Science Foundation grant in 1958, the American Institute of Biological Sciences established the base for BSCS activities at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The BSCS leadership during its first decade of operation was mainly made up of professional biologists. These professional biologists worked with high school educators and administrators to develop and implement new curriculum materials. Their approach was revolutionary, having a profound nationwide effect on high school biological curricula. The BSCS was a new organization of biologists who were determined to bring some much-needed scientific rigor and consistency to high school science. During the first Steering Committee meetings in 1959, the BSCS decided to target high school biology, mainly at the tenth-grade level, for improvement. In the summer of 1960, the BSCS convened an intensive summer writing conference in Boulder, at which three new high school biology textbooks were developed. The three versions were: Blue, a molecular biology approach; Green, an ecological approach; and Yellow, a cellular biology approach. These three versions, and their corresponding newly developed laboratory exercises, were piloted at high schools around the United States during the 1960-61 school year. The curriculum materials were then revised during the summer of 1961 based on feedback from teachers, students, and professional biologists, and tested again during the 1961-62 school year. In 1963, the three textbook versions were published commercially (<http://www.bscs.org/history>).

All three BSCS curriculum versions stressed key biological themes, such as science as inquiry, the complementarity of structure and function, genetic continuity, and evolution. The BSCS textbooks emphasized evolution as a major scientific theory at a time when it was largely omitted from existing high school curricula. Since its inception, the BSCS organization has remained committed to the teaching of evolution (<http://www.bscs.org/history>).

As a novice teacher, I was enthusiastic about my first teaching job. I wanted to make the subject matter relevant and interesting for the students. The BSCS curricula were perfect for me,

as they focused on inquiry and experimentation. The Yellow version for the advanced class provided me with a plethora of interesting experiments that the students could conduct. The Green version was more traditional. It had students dissecting everything from grasshoppers and earthworms, to fetal pigs and cats.

I made foolish mistakes during my first two years of teaching, for example, flooding one-third of the high school when a chemistry experiment requiring cooling condensers went awry over the weekend. (A hose blew off a running faucet, allowing water to pour onto the floor for more than 48 hours.) However, what I lacked in terms of pedagogy, I made up for by developing great relationships with the students. I wanted them to feel both comfortable and excited when they stepped into our classroom. Something must have been working right, as the students voted me the outstanding teacher of the year, perhaps because the students identified with my then “hippie” persona. Forty years later, I remain close friends with several of those students. In fact, several years ago, I was the surprise guest at the class of 1971’s 35<sup>th</sup>-year reunion. It was confirming and heart-warming when several students thanked me for inspiring them in high school. They also reminded me of the time I blew up a school bus that I was driving on the way to a school baseball game (not my fault . . . really!). I didn’t know what Invitational Education was at that time, but I believe I was practicing it.

After two years in rural Ohio, I had the opportunity to pursue my initial interest in medicine. While in college, I had worked summers at the local hospital as a surgical scrub technician. I loved the operating room. Again, I was really “doing” something, not just talking about it. I was offered a position as one of the first physician assistants in the country and was named head of the department, supervising 12 other surgical PAs. However, after several years of first assisting in surgery, I decided I wanted to return to teaching. I missed teaching, coaching, and working directly with the students.

I spent several more years teaching high school biology and coaching sports when I was asked to serve as an assistant athletic trainer for a professional football team. I jumped at the chance, only to quickly discover that it wasn’t what I really wanted to be doing. I spent a lot of time taping ankles, giving ice massages, and cleaning the training room—not very glamorous! I realized I had made a mistake taking this job. I was now in limbo, not knowing which direction to turn. Then, I had an “aha” experience. I would return to school—graduate school.

### **Master’s Education: Learning about Carl Rogers’ ideas**

I explored my options and decided to enter a master’s degree program in College and Community Counseling. I thought I would be able to use my love of teaching by working either one-on-one or in small group settings. I loved my graduate courses; they made so much more sense to me than most of my undergraduate curriculum. The two most defining events during that time focused on student-centered learning. I was required to study a variety of counseling theories. However, it was the writings of Dr. Carl Rogers that really resonated with me. I could

not read enough of Rogers, pouring through some of his books, such as *A Way of Being* (1980), *On Becoming a Person* (1961), and his seminal book on student-centered teaching entitled *Freedom to Learn* (1969). Carl Rogers (1902–1987) was one of the most influential psychologists in American history. His contributions were outstanding in the fields of education, counseling, psychotherapy, peace, and conflict resolution. A founder of humanistic psychology, he has profoundly influenced the world through his empathic presence, his rigorous research, and his authorship of 16 books and more than 200 professional articles.

Rogers' lifetime of research and experiential work was focused on demonstrating the psychological conditions for allowing open communication and empowering individuals to achieve their full potential. He pioneered the move away from traditional psychoanalysis and developed client-centered psychotherapy, central to which "each client has within him or herself the vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes, and self-directed behavior—and that these resources can be tapped by providing a definable climate of facilitative attitudes" (Rogers, N., n.d., p. 1). Rogers' ideas would serve as a reference for William Purkey as he crafted his vision for both his research on the relationship of student achievement to self-esteem, as well as for Invitational Education.

Carl Rogers has provided educators with some fascinating and important questions with regard to their way of being with clients and students, and the processes they might employ. Here are some basic tenets of Rogers' beliefs on education, in his own words, from *Freedom to Learn* (1961):

*I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.*

*I realize that I am only interested in being a learner, preferably learning things that matter, that have some significant influence on my own behavior.*

*I find that one of the best, but most difficult, ways for me to learn is to drop my own defensiveness, at least temporarily, and try to understand the way in which the experience seems and feels to the other person.*

*I find that another way of learning for me is to state my own uncertainties, to try to clarify my own puzzlements, and thus get closer to the meaning that my experience actually seems to have.*

*It is most unfortunate that educators and the public think about, and focus on, teaching. It leads them into a host of questions that are either irrelevant or absurd so far as real education is concerned.*

*I have said that if we focus on the facilitation of learning—how, why, and when the student learns, and how the learning process seems and feels from inside—we might be on a much more profitable track. (p. 277)*

What are the qualities and attitudes that facilitate learning? Rogers said they are Unconditional Positive Regard, Genuineness, and Empathy. Again, in Rogers' words:

**Unconditional Positive Regard: Prizing, acceptance, trust.** There is another attitude that stands out in those who are successful in facilitating learning . . . I think of it as prizing the learner, prizing her feelings, her opinions, her person. It is a caring for the learner, but a non-possessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in her own right. It is a basic trust—a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy . . . . What we are describing is a prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities. The facilitator's prizing or acceptance of the learner is an operational expression of her essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism. (Rogers, 1967, pp. 304-305)

**Genuineness: Realness in the facilitator of learning.** Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes is realness or genuineness. When the facilitator is a real person, being what she is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or a façade, she is much more likely to be effective. This means that the feelings that she is experiencing are available to her, available to her awareness, that she is able to live these feelings, be them, and able to communicate if appropriate. It means coming into a direct personal encounter with the learner, meeting her on a person-to-person basis. It means that she is *being* herself, not denying herself. (Rogers, 1967, pp. 307-308)

**Empathic understanding.** A further element that establishes a climate for self-initiated experiential learning is empathic understanding. When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems *to the student*, then again, the likelihood of significant learning is increased . . . . [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, pp. 310-311)

Rogers' ideas were very compelling to me. They completely resonated with my belief system about effective counseling, and even more important, effective teaching. I was so enamored with Rogers that I decided to call him and talk with him. Much to my surprise, his phone number at his California residence was listed. One of the highlights of my life was the brief phone call I had with Rogers, where I awkwardly expressed my appreciation and admiration for both him and his work. Despite calling him at his home at a less than convenient time, he was gracious and listened carefully to what I said, albeit tortured and clumsy. I was sold on Rogers and his ideas; they would have a profound effect on the rest of my career as an educator.

The second remarkable event during my master's degree program was a course I took from a professor named Tom Maxwell. He perfectly modeled all of the ideas in Rogers' book, *Freedom to Learn* (1969). It was the first course I had ever taken where I felt empowered as a student. Maxwell did a great job facilitating the class and bringing out the talents of the students. Every day was a new adventure in learning. Professor Maxwell never lectured to us; rather, he facilitated active learning! He had unconditional positive regard for each of us. He was empathetic and genuine. I was able to experience first-hand what it felt like to be a student in a truly student-centered classroom.

Following the completion of my master's degree, I again was still unsure of the professional path to follow. Despite having a degree in counseling, I just could not see myself as a counselor. I went back to work as a physician's assistant specializing in surgery for a couple of years, but even that had lost some of the excitement I felt when I initially started my work as a PA. I wanted more adventure, more excitement. I made another key decision in my life: I would move to Alaska.

## **Heading North**

I knew little about Alaska, but I knew I loved the outdoors, and I was ready to escape the Midwest environment where I had spent the first 30-plus years of my life. I traded my car for an old Dodge van, and with my friend Tom, I headed south. Yep, South. I decided to drive to California first and drive the entire Pacific coastline all the way to the Canadian border where I would then start my drive across British Columbia and the Yukon Territory into the great state of Alaska. The journey was full of adventures, miscues, interesting people, and extraordinary places. We had no idea where we would land and what we were going to do in Alaska. We slept in the van or in a tent and eventually made our way to what I believe to be the most beautiful place in North America—Homer, Alaska.

I had never seen any place so magical as Homer. I will always remember when we crested the hill and pulled over into an overlook along the side of the road where we could see Homer, Kachemak Bay, the Alaskan peninsula, and the Kenai mountains. It was like nothing I had ever experienced. Not only was Homer exquisitely beautiful, it was full of interesting people: artists, fishermen, and folks who had relocated there from almost everywhere on the planet. Homer was a true cosmic center of the universe.

My first months there were not prosperous. I ended up working in the Fresh Sourdough Express Bakery and living in a tiny singlewide trailer, without running water, about 10 miles out East End Road. I got my big break when I met Dr. Jim Riggs. Jim had recently come to Alaska from the state of Washington to run the Homer Branch of Kenai Peninsula Community College. We immediately connected and have remained friends for over 30 years. Jim hired me to be the college counselor in charge of the GED program and the ESL program, and more importantly, to teach a psychology course, Human Development.