Applying Learner-centered Education in College Classrooms

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Abstract

Teacher-centered instruction seems to be the norm in many college classrooms. In this approach, the focus of the instruction is on how much knowledge students recall rather than how they think, apply and transfer knowledge in different contexts. This article attempts to show how learner-centered education helps students focus on activities and assignments which are related to their own learning skills. The writer also explores the importance of placing responsibility on the learners, knowing their capabilities and creating environments to help them make connections in their own learning.

Introduction

One of the most difficult challenges of higher education is to incorporate student-centered learning in the classroom. For example, this year I had an opportunity to observe about twenty EFL reading classes for freshmen, taught by Japanese part-time teachers; however, I saw only a few classes conducted in the spirit of student-centered learning. Most of the classes were done in a traditional lecture-based instruction style. In Garden and Richardson-Jones' (2003) article, one professor shared his experience about teacher-centered and student-centered learning. He had been taught science in a traditional lecture hall when he was a student and when he became a teacher, he taught his classes in the same manner. In a few years he found out that lecturing on material was not effective for many students. He decided to teach his students life-long learning skills and allowed them to take responsibility for their own learning. He created a learner-centered environment by focusing on activities and assignments that were related to developing their learning skills.

In many college classrooms, it is difficult to find a professor who has transformed his teaching in the same way. Many teachers are very resistant to changing their teaching style because they tend to claim that there is no evidence to show that traditional teaching is bad and that the new method is better; others say that students want to hear

their lectures (O'Banion, 1997).

Brown (2003) states that the teacher-centered approach mainly focuses on the transmission of knowledge. Teachers usually focus on the importance of the content that students are learning rather than the process of learning. McDonald (2002) says that student achievement is the biggest concern for the teacher-centered curriculum. "This largely passive educational approach motivates and rewards students who are proficient at memorizing and recalling information with little regard for their ability to think with it, apply it, or transfer it to other contexts" (Kopp, Stanford, Rohlfing and Kendall, 2004, p. 12).

The learner-centered approach, on the other hand, is concerned with placing responsibility on the learners, knowing their capabilities and creating environments to help them make connections in their learning. Henson (2003, p. 10) further states that "learner-centered teachers can nurture the development of positive self-concepts by: (1) assigning problems that challenge students but are within their abilities, (2) encouraging them to succeed, and (3) recognizing their successes."

McCombs and Whisler (1997, p .9) define learner-centered education as:

> The 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.)

Learner-centered Education

In order to enhance learner-centered education, O'Banion recommends looking at this subject more holistically. In his abstract O'Banion (2000) suggests the following inventory.

> An inventory for use by colleges and universities committed to becoming more learning-centered institutions is provided. It covers revising mission statements, involving all stakeholders, selecting faculty and staff, training faculty and staff, holding conversations about learning, identifying and agreeing on learning outcomes, assessing and documenting learning outcomes, redefining faculty and staff roles, providing more options, creating opportunities for collaboration, orienting students to new options and responsibilities, applying information technology, reallocating resources, and creating a climate for learning.

O'Banion's article seems to suggest that not only faculty members but also staff in the administration as well as other stakeholders need to work together to create learning-centered environments.

From 1999 to 2003, The Community College of Baltimore (CCBC) developed the LearningFIRST strategic plan and provided "the vision and direction for creating a premier learning college for the 21st century" (McPhail, Heacock and Link 2001, p. 1).

Using the concept of O'Banion's learning college, CCBC created the following philosophy:

- Make learning its central focus.
- Make students active partners in the learning process.
- Assume final responsibility for producing student learning.
- Focus on learning outcomes to assess student learning and success.
- Create a holistic environment that supports student learning.
- Ensure that every member of the college community is a leader.
- Evaluate all areas of the college by the ways they foster student learning.

Since CCBC implemented LearningFIRST through their vision and dedicated action, the school has achieved a number of successes. For example, a study conducted at CCBC showed that students were very interested in the flexible options the school developed for providing education. In response to their needs, CCBC has provided weekend courses, online courses and courses that run over two seven-week semesters within the fifteen-week semester. These flexible courses have stabilized the enrollment of students. O'Banion (1997, p. 15) states, "The learning college places learning first and provides educational experiences for learners any way, and any place, and any time."

Quality of Learning

Although these flexible learning options help students choose a variety of courses according to their needs, the most crucial element of the learner-centered education is the quality of the learning in the classrooms. In order to assure such quality learning, Dening (2004) suggests that teachers first need to identify students' multiple intelligences and learning styles and what seems to work best for them. According to Dening (2004, p. 102) the following are some examples of how people with various intelligences and learning styles learn best:

- Those with verbal and linguistic learning styles learn best through reading, learning and seeing words and speaking, writing, discussing, and debating ideas.
- Those with interpersonal learning styles learn best through sharing, comparing and relating with others, interviewing, and cooperating.
- Those with intrapersonal learning styles learn best through working alone, doing self-paced projects and reflecting.

After finding out what seems to work best for students, the teacher's role is to

maximize their learning in the classroom. Brown (2003, p. 49) states, "learner-centered classrooms place students at the center of classroom organization and respect their learning needs, strategies, and styles." In Darden and Richardson's article (2003), they use several different techniques to promote active learning including (1) think-pair-share practice, (2) low stake quizzing, and (3) modeling activities.

In think-pair-share practice, students are required to think and write down notes about a particular topic. Then students work in pairs and share their ideas for a few minutes. After sharing their ideas, their information is written on the board. This activity is a good way to find out what students know and what they do not know about a topic and to get their background information.

Low-stake quizzing is an activity used to review material covered in the previous class. Students are given a packet of cards as they walk into the classroom. Each packet of cards contains the letters A, B, C, D, T, and F. Students work together and answer questions they read off the overhead. After 5-10 seconds they hold up the card with the right answer. Both the students and the teacher see how each question has been answered. If there is no consensus in class, a brief discussion may take place to clarify the issue. This technique can be used during the class to see how much students have understood the content just covered.

When studying genetics in class, students often cannot visualize vague concepts such as molecules. Modeling activities use common visual aids such as yarn, pipe cleaners, and beads, and require students to follow what the molecules are doing. Sometimes this activity is done in a group by acting out chromosome movement during mitosis or meiosis.

In student surveys, many responses related to learning styles and meaning. Students said that the course was structured according to the ways that they learned best: "visual examples, good lectures, hands-on in-class activities and videos" (Darden and Richardson-Jones 2003, p. 36). They also expressed their appreciation for problem solving and critical thinking skills, which were incorporated throughout the course. Moreover, they mentioned that various activities they performed in class could relate to the world in which they live. This ties directly to Rehm's statement (2003, p. 3) that "Learning is a process that occurs best when what is being learned is relevant and meaningful to the learner and when the learner is actively engaged in creating his or her own knowledge and understanding by connecting what is being learned with prior knowledge and experience."

Contrary to Rehm's statement, Weimer (2003, p. 48) says, "Many traditional instructional approaches respond ineffectively to the learning needs and life situations of today's college students." She further states that even if students actively participate in class, they are "still the passive recipients of education rather than active agents in

control of their own learning processes" (Weimer, 2003, p. 48).

Weimer (2003) proposes changes of practice in five key areas to promote learner-centered teaching: (1) the balance of power, (2) the role of the teacher, (3) the responsibility for learning, (4) the function of content, and (5) the purposes of processes of evaluation. In the balance of power, Weimer says teachers make too many decisions for students, and students make only a few decisions about their own learning. For example, teachers usually decide what students learn, control the pace, decide which content to cover, evaluate the quantity and quality of learning, and determine who gets to speak, when and for how long. The best solution to this decision-making process is to share the decision-making with students. For example, students get involved in decision-making by deciding how long they will do a particular assignment. Furthermore, students determine the policy regarding participation, such as asking and answering questions and making comments in class. As a result teachers control less and students participate more. Weimer (2003) states, "the experience of power motivates learners to accept still more responsibility and builds a commitment to succeed" (p. 49).

Weimer's second proposal concerns the role of the teacher. She says that classroom action focuses on teachers rather than students. If the goal is learning, students must work hard at home and in class. However, in most cases teachers work the hardest: they "deliver the content; lead the discussion; and preview, review, and provide examples of the content. They solve the problems, construct the diagrams, ask and often answer the questions" (Weimer 2003, p. 49). In a study of participation behavior Nunn (1996) found that students participated less than 6% of the time in classrooms he observed.

Weimer suggests that teachers are guides and coaches and that their job is to show students how to learn. They work hard, but they are not supposed to do the work for students. In the classroom, guides do not always organize the content, summarize the discussion or solve the problems. For example, most teachers tend to go over the syllabus since many of them assume that students will not read it. Instead, Weimer recommends that they have students read it silently and have them ask questions. After clarifying their inquiries, teachers could test their knowledge by giving them a non-graded quiz. This enables students to describe the syllabus and gives them a significant reason for reading it. As a result, students could gain knowledge in depth and become more autonomous, independent learners.

Concerning the responsibility for learning, Weimer says that often times teachers enforce rules to reluctant students such as 'attendance is mandatory,' 'make-up exams and late papers are not accepted,' or 'talking, eating, and chewing gum is taboo.' Teachers also provide instrumental motivation. Quizzes encourage students to keep up with assigned reading. Extra points help motivate them to do their homework. As a

result, most students tend to work for incentives rather than from a pure motivation to learn.

Weimer states that in learner-centered environments, students should learn without rules and regulations. Their environments give them the motivation to learn and to accept responsibility for their own learning. For example, the teacher arrives in math class a few minutes early and places the homework assignments for the day on the overhead. It remains on the overhead for a few minutes after the class starts, then the teacher removes the information afterwards. Students who are late for the class must accept the consequences of their action: they cannot obtain information regarding the assignment. In this way, students will become more autonomous in their learning.

Weimer says that the problem with teachers is that they make their top priority covering the content. Although most teachers agree with active learning, many of them still use only a few techniques. They tend to say they have too much material to cover in their course, but they often do not discuss whether the amount of content is enough for majors or the first year or senior year. Ramsden (1988) says that many students can reproduce a great amount of factual information, and pass exams successfully, but cannot demonstrate what they have actually learned. Weimer says that the key solution to this problem is to build students' knowledge base and develop their learning skills. For example, after students take notes in class, they review their notes and underline key concepts. Then they share their notes in pairs and discuss what they have underlined. Toward the end of the class, their shared notes are discussed with the whole class, elaborated and revised. Through this activity, students gain more knowledge and can apply what they have learned in class.

Concerning the purposes and processes of evaluation, Weimer says that teachers often consider grades to be closely related to learning and they evaluate students' performance by themselves. Although grades can do a good job of measuring some kinds of learning such as memorization and rote learning, measuring analysis, synthesis and evaluation is very difficult. Weimer addresses the concern that most college students leave school without learning evaluation skills, including self-evaluation and peer evaluation, because teachers usually evaluate students. By getting involved in evaluation, more students tend to believe that their grades reflect on how well they have learned in class.

While Weimer basically focuses on learning in classrooms, Steffes' article mainly deals with what students can learn beyond classroom environments. For example, a student majoring in finance and marketing can get experience in an accounting firm to see if her major matches her career goals and whether she feels comfortable in that environment. In service learning, one pre-med student went to an elementary school for after-school tutoring. After a semester-long experience she decided to get a teaching

certificate because she thought she could serve more people as a teacher. Many benefits accrue to students who go thorough these experiences beyond the classroom. Steffes (2004, p. 46) states:

> Non-traditional educational experiences connect students' cognitive knowledge inside the classroom with their affective learning in the lab, on the job, or at the service learning site. The instructors and mentors involved begin to shape or enhance young adults' sense of professionalism in their fields well before they leave the campus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one of the most difficult challenges of higher education is to incorporate student-centered learning in classrooms. The quality of education plays a major role in enhancing students' learning. Pierce and Kalkman (2003, p. 127) say that educators should put forth an effort to "(a) establish positive personal relationships, (b) honor students' ideas and opinions, (c) facilitate higher order thinking, and (d) address students' individual needs and beliefs." Although the teacher has the main responsibility for enhancing students' learning, staff in administration as well as other stakeholders should get involved in creating learning-centered environments. As a result, students will become more responsible for their learning and develop learning skills that relate to the world in which they live.

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