Student-Centered Learning

Student-centered learning is an approach to learning in which learners choose not only what to study but also how and why. At the heart of the learning environment are learner responsibility and activity, in contrast to the emphasis on instructor control and coverage of academic content found in conventional, didactic teaching.

About Student-Centered Learning

Student-centered learning has been defined most simply as an approach to learning in which learners choose not only *what* to study but also *how* and *why* that topic might be of interest (Rogers, 1983). In other words, the learning environment has learner responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to the emphasis on instructor control and the coverage of academic content found in much conventional, didactic teaching (Cannon, 2000). Additionally, learners find the learning process more meaningful when topics are relevant to their lives, needs, and interests, and when they are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge (McCombs & Whistler, 1997).

There has been increasing emphasis in recent years on moving away from traditional teaching toward student-centered learning. This paradigm shift has encouraged moving power from the instructor to the learner, treating the learner as a co-creator in the teaching and learning process (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Instructors who deliver student-centered instruction include the learner in decisions about how and what they learn and how that learning is assessed, and they respect and accommodate individual differences in learners' backgrounds, interests, abilities, and experiences (McCombs & Whistler, 1997). The role of the instructor in student-centered classrooms is to encourage learners to do more discovery learning and to learn from each other; the instructor focuses on constructing authentic, real-life tasks that motivate learner involvement and participation (Weimer, 2002).

Characteristics of Student-Centered Learning

Do you remember the best class you ever had? The class in which you were most confident? In which you learned the best? More than likely, this was a class in which you discovered new knowledge and felt motivated to learn both by the instructor and by an intrinsic desire to know more. The student-centered classroom facilitates learning by increasing motivation and effort.

The student-centered model requires that instructors see each learner as distinct and unique. This means recognizing that learners in any classroom learn at different rates with different styles, they have different abilities and talents, their feelings of efficacy may vary, and they may be in different stages of development. In this model, learning is a constructive process that is relevant and meaningful to the learner and connected to the learner's prior knowledge and experience. The learning environment supports positive interactions among learners and provides a supportive space in which the leaner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and validated. Rather than trying to "fix" the learner, the learner has the power to master his or her world through the natural process of learning (McCombs & Whistler, 1997).

The student-centered classroom involves changes in the roles and responsibilities of learners and instructors, in the delivery of instructional strategies, and in learning itself; these all differ from those in the traditional, teacher-center classroom. In the student-centered classroom, the learner requires individualization, interaction, and integration. *Individualization* ensures that learners are empowered to create their own activities and select their own authentic materials. Learners *interact* through team learning and by teaching each other. During the learning process, learners *integrate* what they have learned with prior learning and construct new meaning (Moffett & Wagner, 1992). Below are examples of the changed roles and responsibilities in the student-centered classroom.

Learners

- Are active participants in their own learning.
- Make decisions about what and how they will learn.

- Construct new knowledge and skills by building on current knowledge and skills.
- Understand expectations and are encouraged to use self-assessment measures.
- Monitor their own learning to develop strategies for learning.
- Work in collaboration with other learners.
- Produce work that demonstrates authentic learning.

Instructors
- Recognize and accommodate different learning modalities.
- Provide structure without being overly directive.
- Listen to and respect each learner's point of view.
- Encourage and facilitate learners' shared decision-making.
- Help learners work through difficulties by asking open-ended questions to help them arrive at conclusions or solutions that are satisfactory to them.

Learning is
- An active search for meaning by the learner.
- Constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving it—shaping as well as being shaped by experiences.

Instructional strategies and methods are used to
- Manage time in flexible ways to match learner needs.
- Include learning activities that are personally relevant to learners.
- Give learners increasing responsibility for the learning process.
- Provide questions and tasks that stimulate learners' thinking beyond rote memorization.
- Help learners refine their understanding by using critical thinking skills.
- Support learners in developing and using effective learning strategies for each task.
- Include peer learning and peer teaching as part of the instructional method.

How Can Students Benefit from Student-Centered Learning?

Benefits of the student-centered model are often cited in the literature. Every learner benefits from effective instruction, no matter how diverse their learning needs (Stuart, 1997). Learner motivation and actual learning increase when learners have a stake in their own learning and are treated as co-creators in the learning process (McCombs & Whistler, 1997). In addition, learners who meet with success in assuming new responsibilities gain self-confidence and feel good about themselves (Aaronsohn, 1996), and learners demonstrate higher achievement when they can attribute success to their own abilities and effort instead of luck (North Central Regional Laboratory, 2000).

The process of moving to student-centered learning, however, is not always easy for adult learners. Many initially resist what they perceive as the instructors' abdication of his or her responsibility to manage instruction; knowing that this may happen can help spark a discussion of the changes openly and negotiate new roles for learners and instructors.

Creating a Student-Centered Classroom

Student-centered learning has subtle but profound implications for instructors. To move toward this new model, instructors must be willing to emphasize learning while sharing power with learners in the classroom (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This can be done in a thoughtful way through planning and the use of incremental steps. First, instructors can help learners set goals for themselves and can offer self-directed activities through which learners can build both their self-confidence and their learning skills. As a result, learners become motivated to take greater control of their learning, and instructors gain confidence in managing the new environment.

Next, instructors can encourage learners to discover how they learn best and they can apply different strategies suitable for each learner. Sharing decision-making with learners helps them become more self-directed. When the learner is self-directed, i.e., setting his or her own goals and standards, the instructor becomes a facilitator who reviews learner-set criteria, timelines, lists of resources, collaborations, etc. In the student-centered classroom, the learners have choices in their education, they are responsible for their learning, they measure their own achievement, and they have power in the classroom.

The instructor role changes from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side." Instructors lead less and facilitate more, with learners taking on the responsibility for organizing content, generating examples, posing and answering questions, and solving problems. The instructor does more design work, constructing real-life, authentic tasks that encourage learner involvement and participation. Instructors model or demonstrate

how to approach learning tasks, and they encourage learners to learn from and with each other. The instructor retains responsibility for maintaining a climate of learning.

Instructors who implement the student-centered model move from whole-class instruction to small-group and individual inquiry. These groupings are heterogeneous and require differentiated instruction (see the TEAL Center Fact Sheet No. 5, *Differentiated Instruction*). Rather than keeping learners busy with individual work, the instructor focuses on topics of interest to small groups and creates inquiry into those areas. Learners also benefit from reading and using authentic materials rather than textbooks and basal readers. Time that was spent entirely on content and memorization now balances with time spent learning how to learn and how to understand content. Assessment in the student-centered classroom relies on portfolios that include both instructor-developed and self-assessments.

Note that changing the classroom affects relationships, curriculum, instruction, learner grouping, and evaluation in the following ways:

- *Relationships* between the instructor and learners are more collaborative;

- *Curriculum* is more thematic, experiential, and inclusive of multiple perspectives;

- *Instruction* allows for a broad range of learning preferences, builds from learners' strengths, interests, and experiences, and is participatory;

- *Grouping* is not tracked by perceptions of ability but rather promotes cooperation, a shared responsibility, and a sense of belonging; and

- *Evaluation* considers multiple intelligences, uses authentic assessments, and fosters self-reflection.

Despite the benefits of student-centered learning, the challenge remains for instructors to be open to change and modify their teaching habits. Because relinquishing control of the classroom can be intimidating, it can be helpful for instructors to take small steps and practice new approaches incrementally; this can help assuage the anxiety that often results from abrupt changes. Instructors must remember that this is a learning process for all—experience and continued practice will contribute to successful change.

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