

## Efficiency at the Center of Learning and Teaching

Current literature concerning best practices in education emphasizes the positive points of learner-centered methodology and often seems to suggest that teacher-centered practices are on the opposite side of the education continuum. Some articles use terms such as “teacher-dominated”, or “passive” or “traditional” to describe methods deemed teacher-centered. It is not rare to hear speakers at education conferences highlight the necessity to make what is considered as a paradigm shift toward more and more learner-centered classrooms. Heads of departments and curriculum coordinators also often repeat that students must absolutely be at the center of the learning process. In reality, there may not be the need for such discussion. Both teacher-centered and learner-centered practices may be profitable to the student when instructor attitude is positive, engaging and academically oriented. In order to serve the variety of gifts the students in our classrooms possess instructors may be more successful if they do not reflect so much on the classification of the approach taken. Rather, they should plan what **they** must **do** as well as what the **students** must **do** during their time together so that learning objectives are reached. This article first briefly reviews the benefits of both learner-centered and teacher-centered methodologies and then reports on the positive change in my own university-level ESL classrooms once I began to value student engagement, practical benefit, and improved quality of work rather than the type of approach I was using.

The basic tenets of both the teacher-centered and the learner-centered approaches have the students’ interests at heart. One central concept of learner-centered classrooms and perhaps one of the main reasons there is so much emphasis on applying learner-centered strategies is the principle that motivated students learn better since they need the

skill they are applying in the problem at hand (Norman & Spohrer, 1996, p.1.) Authentic problem solving sessions or class discussions concerning a current event encourage students to take part in the learning activity. Another positive element of learner-centered strategies is the emphasis on “partnerships” in learning between students and teachers (McCombs, 2004 p.90). Few are the instructors today who believe that they are fonts of wisdom. The students I work with respond enthusiastically to my efforts to make my class hours beneficial and pleasant for both of us. One way of making sure that students do benefit is to plan classes around activities and principles that are “developmentally appropriate” (Bredenkamp in Daniels & Perry, 2003, p.103). If the work I have planned is too basic or repetitive, my students do not respond and sit quietly daydreaming; on the other hand, if the work is too far above their level, they become restless and complain about how hard class has become. Authors who advocate learner-centered education are right to insist instructors evaluate students’ level and plan authentic activities that apply principles needed by the students.

According to Brown (2004), instructors in a teacher-centered approach aim at relationships with their students that are based on intellectual explorations rather than student processing. Control for learning is in the hands of the instructor who has a wide base of knowledge and who shares it with the class (p.50). Students benefit from a well-organized lecture which communicates information in a complete, orderly form (Rubin & Hebert, 1998, p.26). According to Kain (2003), judgments about appropriate areas and methods of inquiry, legitimacy of information, and what constitutes knowledge rest with the instructor in a teacher-centered approach. Instructors who plan their lectures so as to save students’ time from reading about concepts rather than applying them are making

good use of teacher-centered methodologies. Direct instruction is a means to awaken students' awareness of what material needs to be covered. Teacher-centered instruction may be very beneficial especially if it is used through thoughtful questioning techniques. According to Limbach and Waugh (2004) planning questions to ask of the class should make up an important part of the instructors' preparation. Once students are familiar with a concept, they should be offered the opportunity to participate in higher-level questioning (p.4). During a class session in which questioning techniques are a main component of the learning process, an instructor may be compared to a director who leads musicians to play in harmony.

Discussions among colleagues and articles concerning the benefits of one approach in comparison to the other led me to re-think my objectives in two of my English classes. The following section demonstrates how my class planning benefited from acting on both the teacher and learner-centered approaches.

In the framework of a freshman-writing course for mainly ESL students, writing a term paper is often among the critical objectives. Instructors aim to evaluate students' aptitude for research, synthesis, clear presentation of documented ideas presented in an acceptable format. Because the course is not only restricted to research skills and instructors feel that "there is so much to be done", they often assign five to seven topics for the entire class, set the due date, determine the number of sources students must refer to, recommend a guide book and leave the students to their own devices. The due date is often near the end of the semester so students may or may not receive their papers before classes are over and thus do not benefit from a whole-class review of research techniques. After reading numerous student papers that proved the student had not acquired the

needed skills, I realized that my methodology was inefficient for three main reasons. Some students may find a three-week assignment overwhelming. Others are unaware of the seriousness of plagiarism and do not know how to document. Still others find difficulty separating their own educated opinions from those of the many authors they have read and turn in “photocopies” of web-sites which many times are inaccurate, biased and invalid sources of information.

I began my new method of teaching research techniques with a questionnaire to gauge the class’s attitude to long-term work and research knowledge in general.

#### Questionnaire

Directions: Think about your answers to these questions. Be ready to participate in a whole-class discussion when you finish.

1. When an instructor assigns an assignment for next week, do you immediately set to work or do you wait till two days before it is due?
2. Are you in the habit of dividing your long-term assignments into a number of specific tasks to be completed one by one?
3. Do you consider yourself familiar with and competent in taking notes?
4. Do you know the difference between in-text documentation and a reference page?
5. Are you in the habit of going to the library to browse through books?
6. Do you surf the net as a means to find recent resources? Do you know how to decide on the validity of a web site?
7. What databases do you depend on when you do research?
8. Do you write a first draft of an assignment one or two days before it is due?

The responses given and the tone of the class discussion that follow the questionnaire help me to design step two: a mini-lecture at the next class session. This is a mini-lecture because it is interrupted to show students a model paper, as well as papers

turned in by former students and which have received various evaluations ranging from excellent to less excellent. Students are introduced to the difference between summarizing and paraphrasing as well as citing quotations in a paper. Depending on how experienced the students are, the lecture may include information on documentation and basics of how to write a reference page. A brief period for students to express their anxiety about the research process is also included.

Step Three in the process is to engage students in the selection of a topic to research. If topics are in question form, they are easier to narrow down and explore. E.g. What are some of the main reasons why scientists have not yet been able to find a cure for cancer? Why is it that we are not certain whether aliens have visited Earth? It is helpful to engage the students in whole-class discussion on the topics of interest. Students may also work in small groups to continue their search for unsettled issues. Once the student has identified an area of interest, and feels secure in the basics, or knows where to go to find the answers, set the deadline with the class. Take into consideration how much time you need to evaluate the paper and to give it back to the students. Leaving a class period to discuss the outcomes of the students' papers is generally a positive closure to the assignment. Once the basics have been settled, the rest of the work on the paper may be organized efficiently by distributing this guide or one that fits your particular objectives. By working around the guide instructors can schedule the time they wish to allocate to classroom activities. Instructors may also add time frames for completion of the steps. The guide may serve as the first page of the research portfolio students use for their first research paper.

## Research Paper Guide

Directions: Use this guide to help you organize your thoughts and the procedure you will follow to complete a high-quality expression of your research.

1. *The research question I have decided to explore is:* \_\_\_\_\_

2. *After having done some exploratory reading, my preliminary outline is the following:*

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3. *After having consulted books, magazines, databases, websites, I have now narrowed down my subject to the following:* \_\_\_\_\_

4. *My preliminary thesis statement is:*

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5. *I have a working bibliography. My sources come from: books, magazines, newspapers, personal interviews, databases, etc.....*

6. *I have taken notes and have organized them in a systematic way. My documentation is clear so as to avoid plagiarism.*

7. *My first draft is ready.*

8. *My revision is complete. Language, transitions, format are correct.*

9. *The paper is typed and ready to hand in. The title page, the formal outline and reference page are also included.*

When students are guided through the process of research and it has been a pleasant, relatively stress-free process, they may be surprised at the pride they feel in turning in a paper that is a reflection of their thought process. They may even look forward to further opportunities to explore new issues.

Encouraged by my success in making research paper techniques accessible to more of my students, I began to look at more efficient ways of treating argumentative texts and encouraging critical thinking concerning the issues they treated. The simplest means of “teaching” the course had been to assign a reading and probing questions to think about before the class session. During class, a lively discussion on the form, format and the issue itself was to take place. Very often, however, only a minority of the class had prepared the text and the discussion was actually a conversation.

My new approach begins by announcing the issue to be studied for the following two to three class sessions. Students are presented with five articles concerning various aspects of the issue and asked to choose to read one before the next class session. Articles classified according to issues are often found in the “Argumentative Reading” section of the class textbook thus this is a very practical means of introducing the many sub-issues involved in controversial subjects. No particular questions are given, but students are asked to be ready to “respond” to the article and to justify their responses. The students sign a checklist simply as a means of ensuring an approximate equality in the number of students reading each text.

Students arrive to the second class session to see their names and group number posted at the door. Once the group has settled in and has delegated a spokesperson, a moderator and a timer, probing questions particular to each text are distributed. Instructors may ask students to suggest questions of their own once they are more experienced. Students are then given 17 minutes to discuss their own responses to the article and their answers to the questions. The group spokesperson then gives a 2-3 minute report to the whole class concerning their tentative conclusions. The other class

members take notes on the reports so as to be informed of other points of view. A short whole-class discussion allows the instructor to bring the five texts into the focus of the general issue. For the next class session, students are asked to read one other essay they found interesting and to participate in a debate on the issue.

The role of the instructor is to choose interesting controversial texts, organize the technical aspects of the group work and provide a basic set of probing questions for discussion. The instructor may also conclude the class with a summary of the major points. Students are responsible for reading the texts closely enough so as to participate in small group discussion and then share their points of view in a whole-class discussion. Not only do students read two essays, but also they are exposed to ideas presented in three others. Instructors may invite students to present written responses to the articles; the possibilities depend on one's imagination.

Since I stopped worrying about whether I was "learner-centered" enough and began to focus more on how to make my classes really beneficial for my students, my students often come into class and leave it with a smile on their faces. I feel more efficient and I smile more frequently too.

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article was to clarify the seemingly contrary philosophies of learner centered and teacher centered teaching approaches. First, the benefits of both approaches are described. Examples of ways in which teacher centered classes using thoughtful questioning techniques or focused lectures enhance learning are presented. The necessity for authentic material to develop student skills in a learner centered activity is also emphasized. The second section demonstrates how instructors can improve their teaching and increase student learning by combining both teacher and learner centered approaches in the initiation to research paper writing module of a freshman English course and the improved student participation and benefit from an Argumentative writing class. Qualitative results suggest that both students and instructor were more motivated and benefited from their class time. When an instructor emphasizes what a student must DO during a class session as well as what the instructor must also DO, rather than planning methodology from a purely structured point of view, learning should be more pleasant. Educators need to worry less about the classification of their methodology and stress more on the practicality and desired outcomes of the activities they use to meet their teaching objectives. (2 student activity sheets).

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