Capstone Project – Original Contribution

The Impact of a Learner-Centered Environment and How to Achieve It

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Abstract: Current educational systems are making shifts from teacher-centered to learner-centered environments. This shift creates space for more involvement from students in their own instructional and assessment processes that sets them up for success in a method that allows them control of their achievement. Teachers have to assess and reflect on their own teaching styles and philosophies in order to make more informed instructional decisions that cater to students and their learning styles and abilities. Research has shown that a more learner-centered learning environment can be beneficial to student comprehension and concept retention and creating overall more successful educational systems. This includes learning how to implement learner-centered principles; cooperative and problem-based learning strategies; and the promotion of integrated curriculum and critical thinking.

Key Words: strategies; learning community; learner-centered; problem-based learning; integrated curriculum; educator

The Impact of a Learner-Centered Environment and How to Achieve It

A dramatic shift in recent years in the educational system towards a trend of learner-centered classroom environments and principles has resulted in a lot of reflection and assessment of what is currently being implemented and how effective it is. Faculty and staff at schools nationwide must change how they plan and implement curriculum ranging from lesson delivery all the way to involving students in the assessment process. In order to establish a community of learners that is based on learner-centered principles and outcomes, educators have to work towards a higher understanding that students construct knowledge from the understandings, skills, attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and cultural diversity that they are able to contribute to their own learning environment. This requires more and more modern educators to evaluate and reflect on their teaching practices and adjust their areas of strengths and weaknesses to be more student-involved and to consider students more in their planning and instruction. This culmination can productively effect communities of learners in 21st century educational systems.

This means that teachers must feel prepared to implement strategies for building a learning community, with an emphasis on learner-centered principles; cooperative and problem-based learning strategies; and the promotion of integrated curriculum and critical thinking.

Teacher-Centered vs. Learner-Centered Environments

Traditional learning environments such as classrooms in schools had a tendency towards being focused on teacher-centered ideals and strategies. These environments focused on the instructor who chose the topics, spoke and expected students to listen, and operated under an assumption that the teacher knew more about the subject area than anyone or anything else, and therefore took priority. While students should feel that their instructor is knowledgeable about the subject area and content concepts they are teaching, the focus of a classroom and how it runs should not rely or come from the instructor themselves, but instead should be a cooperative learning environment with input from all parties, including the faculty and the students. It is up to educators in today's classrooms to make this shift from a teacher-centered environment to one that includes and focuses on the students.

Learner-centered teaching methods bring focus away from the teachers as a primary source, and puts that focus on the learners. Students can become a part of their active learning by solving problems, answering questions, formulating questions of their own, having discussions with peers, explaining their understanding, debating with others, or brainstorming during class sessions to try to gain information and comprehension. Research has shown that a learner-centered environment has a greater effect on student success and achievement. Students must feel a sense of ownership and control over their own academic progression in order to stay engaged and understand the impact that their learning will have on their future.

Student-centered pedagogy is based on constructivist and democratic principles. That students make sense of what they learn in a classroom environment in which they are stimulated to develop their reflective and critical thinking and sense of responsibility come to the fore in student-centered pedagogy. Teacher-centered instruction on the other hand relied heavily on the behaviorist theory which was based on the idea that behavior changes are caused by external stimuli. Compared with student-centered classroom, students in teacher-centered classroom are passive and respond to environmental stimuli. Teacher has the ultimate authority and is in charge of learning for that reason students do not have adequate opportunities to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Serin, 2018).

Learner-centered principles require some restructuring of classrooms and schools to maximize relevancy for students, which can be a deterrent to some educational institutions who do not want to take the required steps for this to happen. However, if teachers and administrators in all academic climates understood that learning should be focused on the learners themselves and not on the teaching, curriculum, or outside forces, students can feel involved and connected to their learning. Therefore, though the shifts sometimes do not want to be a made or focused on by some educators, they are of the utmost importance. Educators have to understand this importance and the great impact it can have on overall achievement, which is the underlying goal of being an educator to begin with.

Student Contributions – What Works and What Doesn't

In order for students to become active, goal-directed, and self-regulated in a learner-centered environment, they must understand the roles of assuming personal responsibility and contributing to their own learning. This can be achieved by exposing them to various avenues of strategic thinking that allows them to successfully use a variety of thinking and reasoning strategies that help them to reach their learning and performance goals and apply knowledge in unfamiliar situations. Studies show that students are more motivated by interacting with their teacher, classmates, and technology that is appropriate for the level of learning in a particular classroom environment and with positive cultural and group influences. This impact their ways of thinking not just about the subject matter at hand, but as a whole in life and world scenarios. This also contributes to students gaining a more constructive and positive attitude towards learning and gives students opportunities to engage in tasks of higher-order thinking and flexible creativity. By giving students control of their learning, it requires them to lean on and activate their prior knowledge to engage in tasks that are new, interesting, and personally relevant as an authentic example. Students should be taught how to effectively collaborate with others and to build relationships that foster respect for diversity, self-respect, and a sense of belonging and social competence in their community of learners.

As important as looking at what students should be able to accomplish and what is a positive impact on a learner-centered environment is looking at what does not work and what could hinder implementation of having students take ownership of their learning. The most prevalent impediment is the teaching style and philosophy present in the educational leader in the classroom. If students are not given the opportunities and tools to examine their learning preferences and capabilities by the adult they view as in-charge and who facilitates their

learning, they will not be able to take it upon themselves to grow in the role of their own educational leadership.

Research suggests that the teacher- centered approach does not positively impact students' learning as much as traditionally assumed because so much of the learning depends on the students' ability to absorb what the teacher is saying or demonstrating. When a teacher-centered instructor stands before a class and presents information for students to learn, very little exchange occurs. Studies have found that in an average lecture, the instructor delivers about 5000 spoken words of which students record only about 50 (Namgyel, 2013).

Students can often struggle with utilizing opportunities for self-assessment and using that as intrinsic motivation for improvement. While students are taught that they must take responsibility for their learning, it is a teacher's responsibility to fill the gaps in their motivation to understand the importance of doing so and of working towards their goals accordingly. Teachers who find comfort in a teacher-centered learning environment are less likely to accept the challenge of showing students the importance and value of self-reflection and improvement, and more likely to pass blame on students for poor performance or achievement. There is no room for blame in a learning environment. Teachers must learn to take the focus off of themselves and place it on the students in a collaborative and constructive way for all parties to have equal roles and contributions towards the desired level of success.

Building a Learner-Centered Community

So the question comes in to play, how does an educator make the change from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered environment? If an educator is used to doing things in a particular way that has been their norm or the norm of their district, it can be difficult to make the necessary changes to better accommodate students to be owners of their own learning and achievement. "When students have choice and are allowed to control major aspects of their learning (such as what topics to pursue, how and when to study, and outcomes to achieve) they are more likely to self-regulate their thinking and learning processes than when they have little or no choice or control" (McCombs & Miller, 2007). As an educator, teachers must become apt at how to give control over to their students and motivate them to self-reflect and have a choice in their learning without relinquishing classroom management and a safe and supportive classroom environment. To effectively accomplish this, it's not necessary to reinvent the wheel or give up all sense of control. Some of the simplest strategies and tools that can be used for learner-centered instruction can come from simple methods such as getting to know individual students and their learning styles, building a positive and supportive classroom, providing differentiated and personalized learning experiences, providing authentic learning experiences, allowing for collaborative learning, and monitoring and providing feedback to students as they engage in self-regulated learning.

Districts can also contribute to learner-centered classrooms by reassessing the required curriculums to incorporate more understanding of what the enduring understanding of concepts should be for students and how to make adjustments to accommodate their use of prior knowledge to gain new knowledge. "Learner-centered curriculum proposes to create highly developed individuals, providing them the skills to continue creating learning experiences, digest

current knowledge, and create new knowledge within the curriculum itself. This definition of a learner-centered curriculum includes components that educators deem to be relevant and vital for students. It adds curriculum processes and required outcomes to prepare students for curriculum creation alongside educators" (Emes & Cleveland-Innes, 2003). This principle implies that by acknowledging the need for more learner-centered and thought out curriculums that gives students more of a choice and a voice in their instruction and assessment, districts can begin to change the way they deliver and expect requirements to be met in traditional educational environments to provide more choice and input from the learners themselves.

Conclusion

There is more research today than ever before that speaks to the benefits and positive integration of learner-centered classrooms, and a movement away from traditional, teacher-focused environments. By giving up the sense that teachers must know all of the content and concepts they are teaching and leaning more into an ideal that they are part of the learning process along with the students, more emphasis is placed on how students react to and reflect on their own learning. This includes their ability to improve due to intrinsic motivation because they understand what makes them a more whole and complete learner and member of society. The changes to create more supportive and learner-centered environments must be contributed to by both educators and districts alike. The benefits of making these adjustments become more and more clear with the minor changes that are made to be more accommodating and inclusive of student input and giving them control over their own achievement.

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