

Running Head: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Student Perceptions of Learner-Centered Education

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Abstract

An analysis of college students' perceptions of learner-centered educational practices can help instructors to develop strategies for making a successful transformation to learner-centered education. Approximately 45 freshman and sophomore students enrolled in a college composition course or an introductory humanities course at a Midwestern university in 2005-2006 received a presentation on the learner-centered paradigm that would form the basis of class activities. They subsequently reported their perceptions of learner-centered educational practices. Students in the composition course wrote their goals for the course during the first class session, their initial perceptions mid-semester, and during the final class session, their assessment of how the learner-centered practices facilitated their goals. The humanities students wrote their expectations of the course and the instructor during the first class session and, during the final class session, their perceptions of how the learner-centered practices aligned with their expectations. While the transition for many students was initially unsettling and even intimidating, the students' progress toward learner-centered thinking was evident. In taking greater responsibility for their own learning, students reported satisfaction as they became more active and engaged. The process of becoming educated, self-directed, autonomous members of society demands that students develop active learning, a primary purpose of the learner-centered paradigm.

Student Perceptions of Learner-Centered Education

The fall semester has just begun. Students are talking informally between classes, comparing their first impressions of their instructors and their classes. One outgoing, animated young man laughs as he says how easy –or did he say “what a joke”–one of his classes is going to be. The professor, he explains, hands out an outline for every chapter as it is assigned, and then “goes over it” the following class period. All the student has to do is jot down what the professor says. The student gloats, “I won’t even have to crack the book.”

A first-year faculty member, a conscientious young instructor who meticulously prepares his lessons for each class, complains that his students don’t participate in class and don’t even read the assignments. “I spend so much time making my PowerPoint presentations for each chapter of the text,” he says, “and all they do is sit there and wait for me to show the next slide. They expect me to tell them what they have to know for the test.” He acknowledges that he is doing far more work for the class than the students are.

Student evaluations from last semester have been delivered to the faculty mailboxes. Among the written comments from students in a course that uses learner-centered strategies, one evokes a sigh from the professor: “I didn’t like how we had to work in groups and pick out what we thought was important. I believe that it’s the instructor’s job to tell us what’s important.”

The incidents described above are common in higher education; the first two describe common pitfalls of instructor-centered teaching. The faculty members are taking the traditional role of dispenser of knowledge, relegating the students to the role of passive vessels who receive

the delivered knowledge, to recall it only for tests (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Beane, 1997; Friere, 1970; Mezeske, 2004; Weimer, 2002, 2003). The third incident brings to light a common reaction from that same type of students when they experience, perhaps for the first time, a shift to learner-centered education. They are likely to resist taking responsibility for their own learning when they have become accustomed to having their instructors willing to do so for them.

Fostering Autonomy in Learning

Consider the paradox of education: We strive to be effective as teachers, but we cannot assess how effective our teaching is unless we focus on what our students have learned. We have to trust that their tests, quizzes, and papers give credible evidence that they truly have learned from our teaching. Yes, the students have been present as we “covered the material” laid out in the syllabus, but have they really *uncovered* it? Or have we unwittingly trained our students to invest time and effort—and tuition dollars—only for the token goal of an A or B on an exam? Have we co-created a tendency for students to be dependent upon us for what they perceive to be “real” learning? College students, as products of an educational system that has traditionally placed responsibility for the learning process on that person standing at the front of the classroom, may likely expect to be passive recipients of knowledge—at least initially. But what is true for those who teach is true for those who learn as well: In order not only to master content but also to become self-directed and autonomous—indeed, to join the ranks of the educated—humans must actively engage in the process of learning, discovering for themselves how to incorporate new knowledge into what they already know and how to create new knowledge (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Cross, 1999; Greene, 1988; Howell, 2002). Students must adjust their expectations of what happens in a college classroom and take greater responsibility for their

own learning in order to progress toward self-direction and autonomy, and therein lies the resistance.

Engaging students in taking greater responsibility for their own learning can be a significant challenge to instructors, particularly if we have relied for years on using the same pedagogical approach to teaching that we ourselves experienced as students. And the shift can be unsettling to students, who may balk at having the rules changed in a game that they have come to know so well. Students are likely to have been conditioned to sit quietly in their seats, take notes, perhaps ask a question or discuss a point or two, and cram the knowledge into their short-term memories in order to pass the test. We are unlikely to encounter students clamoring for learning experiences that test their decision-making skills, challenge their ability to interpret meanings, or demand their own evaluation and substantiation. When they enroll in a course in which the rules are changed, they are likely to resist the learner-centered approach—at least initially. However, with persistence, instructors who commit to learner-centered approaches will be gratified when they receive written comments on their evaluations that affirm what the purpose of college teaching is all about. Among the written comments will be those that evoke a smile rather than a sigh from the professor: “I personally learned a lot from this course and I really enjoyed [the professor’s] style of teaching, because she taught us to teach ourselves.”

Consequences of Instructor-Centered Approaches to Teaching

The purpose of a shift to a learning paradigm, as Barr and Tagg (1995) argued, is “create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems” (p. 15). The traditional pedagogical approach to teaching, that of the familiar instructor-as-dispenser-of-knowledge, places responsibility for the learning process primarily on

the instructor. Delivery of content takes precedence. The students' resulting passivity thwarts inquiry and engagement in learning; instructors become frustrated at the students' lack of motivation and effort and their expectations of being spoon-fed information. But it is, in fact, the instructor-centered teaching strategies that have contributed to such outcomes.

Unintended consequences of the instructor-centered paradigm include what Beane (1997) identified as three conditioned learning styles: avoidance, characterized by the student's lack of participation and perhaps irregular attendance; dependence, characterized by the student seeking the safe route, doing only what he or she is told; and competitiveness, characterized by the student focusing entirely on the token goal of grades and viewing other students competitively. Such responses are what the traditional pedagogical approach to teaching has trained students to do. Hansen and Stephens, in their article, "The Ethics of Learner-Centered Education: Dynamics That Impede the Process" (2000), cited students' learned helplessness as a primary obstacle to their shift to the learning paradigm:

Too many students have been socialized in earlier schooling to believe they cannot learn course material unless it has been predigested by an instructor. . . . Years of passive note-taking and silent absorption of information have convinced many students that this is an appropriate way to learn. . . . [Students believe] that they can rely almost exclusively on the instructor to tell them what they need to know. (p. 42)

Learned helplessness contributes to students putting forth less effort for grades and expecting their instructors to maintain control by focusing on course content. Students "have the illusion of success," Hansen and Stephens (2000) argued, and are unwilling to relinquish "the comfort of a dependent relationship" (p. 42). Instructors recognize that a transformation is necessary if

students are to become self-directed and autonomous learners, but for many, it is easier to give the students what they expect.

Resistance to Shifting the Paradigm

Three years following Barr and Tagg's seminal work, "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education" (1995), Robert Barr examined progress toward the shift in "Obstacles to Implementing the Learning Paradigm: What It Takes to Overcome Them" (1998). Quoting a 1998 conference announcement of the American Association for Higher Education, Barr confirmed that "on many campuses the rhetoric about learning and student-centeredness outpaces the reality" (1998, p. 18). He emphasized how the shift requires "a new way of thinking," not only for instructors but also for the institutions of higher education. Barr's discussion of organizational resistance to change carries implications for yet another group of stakeholders—the students themselves. When change is implemented, "a new game begins," and the "players" have to learn a new set of rules; success in the original game "does not necessarily translate into an advantage in the new game. Thus those who have been successful in the current game are likely to resist changing the game" (Barr, 1998, p. 21). Just as faculty members may respond with anxiety and reluctance to a new paradigm, so will some students. Those who have experienced success (i.e., good grades) have "mastered a set of rules that privileges teacher action: get the right answer (the teacher's answer); expect every action to merit some tangible reward from the teacher (points or extra credit); work just enough to earn the grade . . ." (Mezeske, 2004, p. 1).

Yes, students are likely to resist a shift from the instructor-centered paradigm to a learner-centered paradigm—at least initially. Many are likely to respond with anxiety and reluctance to a re-focusing of purpose and locus of responsibility—at least initially. Learning

content takes time; learning process does, as well. To foster self-direction and autonomy in our students, faculty have the responsibility of teaching not only content but also “the habits of mind” that will enable them to make the shift successfully (Hassel & Lourey, 2005). Faculty would do well to persist and be patient with their students’ adjustment, for “although the promised benefits are real, they are neither immediate nor automatic. The students, whose teachers have been telling them everything they needed to know from the first grade on, don’t necessarily appreciate having this support suddenly withdrawn” (Felder & Brent, 1996, p. 43).

Maryellen Weimer (2002) proposed four likely reasons why students resist the shift to a learner-centered paradigm. One is that they must put forth more effort. Rather than having the instructor dictate “what is important,” the students must engage in analysis, reflection, and discussion with others to determine not only what is important but why it is important. Weimer encouraged faculty members to “[c]onsider resistance based on this reason as a sign that the approaches . . . are accomplishing their desired objective” (2002, p. 151).

Second, a shift to learner-centered education can be more threatening. Students lose their sense of security and may experience anxiety and be reluctant to engage in strategies that are unfamiliar. Weimer (2002) pointed out that such anxiety may be especially pronounced in students who lack confidence in their own ability as learners.

Similarly, learner-centered approaches involve a sense of loss for some students. What they knew to be certain has been withdrawn. As they engage in taking greater responsibility for their own learning, “[t]hey may understand intellectually that the new approaches are good for them and foster their personal development. But the feeling of loss . . . sometimes manifests itself as resistance” (Weimer, 2002, p. 153).

It is certainly possible that learner-centered approaches may be beyond the ability of some students, as Weimer (2002) presented as a fourth reason for students' resistance. Some students are passive, dependent, and unconfident, perhaps not only because they have been conditioned to be so but also because they lack a level of maturity necessary to make a successful transformation. While we must not give up on those students nor abandon learner-centered approaches based on that possibility, we must take into account that those students will legitimately resist what they do not feel capable of.

Perceptions of Learner-Centered Approaches: Students' Responses

Simply describing the purpose and strategies of learner-centered education during the first class session is not likely to convince all students of its merits and to turn resistance to cooperation and engagement. The process of transformation must be carefully designed and consistently implemented, even as we, as instructors, discover which strategies work and which need modification. As we shift paradigms from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on learning, we can invite our students along as we focus on not only the content of the course but also the process of learning. We can invite their participation in determining the strategies that will help them to achieve the goals of the course. At the beginning of a course, we can foster engagement by asking such questions as, "What do you expect to learn in this class?" We can encourage self-assessment at the end by asking, "What have been your most significant achievements in this class?"

An informal case study of my students' perceptions of learner-centered strategies yielded information that has served to confirm the effectiveness of some simple strategies. In one class, a second-semester composition course, I introduced how we were going to use learner-centered instruction, including peer review, and presented what level of learning each letter grade would

represent. I asked students on the first day to write down their goals, including what grade they anticipated earning and how they intended to achieve that grade. Of the majority who predicted an A or B grade (88%), most appeared to take responsibility for their own progress from the outset, writing that they would “work hard,” manage their time effectively, and attend all classes. Only one student maintained the focus on the instructor as dispenser-of-grades, stating “I hope to receive an above-average grade.” Nevertheless, by mid-semester when I asked students to jot down a report of their progress toward accomplishment of their goals, even that one student appeared to make the shift to responsibility for her own learning: “I feel more bold about sharing how I feel about topics. I feel that I can support my beliefs and ideas more accurately with credible sources. I write more clearly.” Students then wrote two additional goals (or the same goals, if they had not yet been achieved). Their progress toward learner-centered thinking was already much more evident than on the first day of class; all wrote specific, objective goals that they intended to achieve by the end of the course.

Finally, on the last day of our class, I asked them to write a brief “self-assessment” of their overall progress:

“I have been able to reaffirm my basic English knowledge and apply the knowledge to a higher level of writing. . . . I feel I have improved my technical knowledge and English structure.”

“I think I have learned a great deal about blending an academic tone with my own personal style.”

“The most improvement I made this semester was in my confidence to do peer reviews of other people’s papers. I understand the structure of how the paper should be and the proper way to write an essay.”

“The most notable improvements in my writing I believe have been structure, better organization, and word choice.”

“I am better aware of the way I write and I have also become quite critical of the way other people write. I have learned how to correctly cite my references using both APA and MLA format.”

Implementing learner-centered strategies seemed quite successful in the composition course, but to determine whether it was the course or this particular group of students that made the strategies work, additional case studies are necessary.

Other courses present more of a challenge and reveal more differences in students' perceptions. In a survey humanities course, one that demands significant reading, students are to analyze major concepts of cultural history according to specific guidelines discussed early in the course and reinforced throughout the semester. To help them make the transition from what they initially expect to be doing—memorizing names, dates, and vocabulary in bold print—I introduce them to Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning, explaining that we will be working toward the higher levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. We discuss how they have been accustomed to working in the lower levels of knowledge, comprehension, and perhaps application. The transition for many students is intimidating—at least initially. However, when asked to respond on the faculty evaluation at the end of the course what they liked best, students often reveal that they have made progress toward the transition to the learner-centered paradigm. They respond that they like:

“The class participation. I loved the fact that everyone talked and you got an idea of what other classmates were thinking.”

“The introduction of Bloom’s Taxonomy and how the class was taught around it. A very, very helpful and useful tool in the classroom.”

“The instructor’s emphasis on critical thinking, and the constant challenge that it provided. I like how it was so involved. The students interacted with each other and we interacted with our teacher. She was always looking for our input and it was more in-depth learning to give us a better understanding of the course material.”

“The learner-centered style. I feel like I learn more and that what I do learn, I’ll be more likely to remember.”

“[That] it really challenged me to retain the knowledge and what was retained is very interesting.”

Some students’ comments reaffirmed that the transition to learner-centered strategies is not necessarily immediate:

“I enjoy the [learner-centered] technique. It is hard to get used to at first but once I had her for a few classes, I adapted.”

“I think the way the course is taught is very helpful in learning. At first I was put off by it because I had never had a course like this, but I did come to enjoy the class very much.”

Even those comments that were written in response to the question of what the students liked least about the course revealed some progress toward shifting the responsibility of learning from the instructor to the student. Some wrote that they did not like:

“That the instructor really did not teach the class to us. She just kind of let us figure it out for ourselves.”

“I felt I only learned what I taught myself.”

“[That] this class needs to be more knowledge based because from the time we were little we were taught one way. It’s hard to learn something different for one class then switch back right after.”

Such student responses elicit several questions: Should college instructors teach the way students have always been taught? Should we teach in accordance with their comfort levels, or should we challenge them to higher levels? How can we encourage students to develop flexibility in their ability to learn, to overcome rigid expectations? How might we collaborate with other instructors so that our teaching strategies are complementary? How might we work together to reinforce and advance students’ understanding of the process of learning?

Undertaking the shift from the instructor-centered paradigm to the learner-centered paradigm can evoke, understandably, some anxiety and reluctance from the instructors. Even more so, students are likely to balk when they are expected to take greater responsibility for their own learning. The process that they have come to know so well, the exchange of instructor-dispensed knowledge for a grade, is no longer the sole basis of their education. The role of passive, dependent student that they have learned to play is replaced by the role of active, engaged, responsible learner. Students may resist—at least initially. However, the process of becoming an educated, self-directed, autonomous member of society demands that students actively engage in the process of learning. To lead students to expect anything less is to shortchange their education and to contribute to a distortion of what capacities they will be expected to possess as college graduates.

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