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Learner-centric Teaching

S. Rajendran, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This paper articulates and discusses the principles of Learner-centric Teaching and how it differs from Teacher-centric Learning. It suggests that the Learner-centric teaching is the most effective method as it engages students working in and solving real-world problems in a meaningful context with the guidance of the teacher. The learning activities are closely aligned with the learning outcomes. This method of teaching involves all students by creating interest and results in effective learning outcome.

Learner-Centric Teaching

Learner-centric teaching can be defined as learning and teaching that emphasizes student responsibilities for such activities as planning, learning, interacting with teachers and other students and assessing learning. It focuses attention on the learning process: what the student is learning, how the student is learning and the conditions under which the student is learning. Learner-centric teaching helps the students to develop:

- i. oral communication skills
- ii. positive attitude
- iii. self-responsibility
- iv. inter-personal relationships and
- v. Self-esteem.

In the traditional method of teaching, long duration deadlines are given to achieve the goals, answers for questions are available in the text book and the teaching is individual based. In the learner centric teaching, each member of a group in the class contributes individually and makes learning enjoyable. Short duration is given to individual and group collaborative learning helps cover grounds in a shorter duration. To answer questions students need to refer to various sources like internet, books, journals etc. Assignments and projects are given with specific deadline. Adhering to deadlines become more challenging to students.

Unlike in traditional method, in learner centric method, teacher plays the role of an enabler, mentor, guide and facilitator. These roles of the teacher help the learners to develop their knowledge, skills and problem solving abilities. Any deep level education would not necessarily translate into skilled performance without additional skills like critical solving (Romiszowski, 2006).

To enable skilled performance an approach to teaching and learning that focuses on learners, learning and learning context is needed (Naidu 2006).

Principles of Learner-centric Approach

1. Teaching must engage learners in solving meaningful and real world problems. If one problem situation might not be enough to develop among the learners all the required competencies, another problem situation must be developed.
2. Learning is optimized when it is situated within a meaningful context and within the culture and community in which learners live and work (Merill, 2002; Naidu, 2006).
3. A learning-centric curriculum should be grounded in the principle of situated cognition (Mc Lellan, 1996; Wilson, 1996).
4. Learning is optimized when the learning tasks and activities in the problem situations are clearly articulated and explicitly linked to knowledge and skills already mastered (Merill, 2002).

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Why Do We Need Learner-centric Teaching?

Learner-centric teaching makes students life-long learners and makes them more accountable. The student actively looks at the teacher for learning. The student is exposed to multiple areas of learning viz. classrooms, vide-lectures, internet browsing and other learning techniques. It is an interesting choice for students who are struggling to cope up with the current educational system. The learning activities are closely aligned with the learning outcomes.

Students learn skills for the profession as well as skills needed for a happy life. In an anonymous letter written by a father to his son's teacher tells us the important things, he desires the teacher to teach his son. I quote some parts:

A father's letter to his son's teacher

He will have to learn. I know

that all men are not just

all men are not true.

But teach him also that

for every scoundrel there is a hero;

that for every selfish politician

there is a dedicated leader .

teach him for every enemy there is a friend

steer him away from envy

if you can, teach him

the secrets of quite laughter.

In the school teach him

It is fair far honorable to fail than cheat

Teach him to have faith in his own ideas

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Try to give my son
the strength not to follow the crowd
when everyone is getting the band wagon.

Learner-centric teaching is not about delivering the content of the curriculum where the teacher is the master and controller. But it requires the learners take responsibility for their own learning with the teacher helping them to access and process information. There is a strong focus on what the students do to achieve rather than what the teacher.

Examples of Learner-centric Teaching

In the teacher centered approach the teacher was the information distributor, the gate keeper of knowledge, the instructor rather than facilitator but the paradigm shift from this model to Learners centered teaching which according to Deakin-Crick (2005) director of the Effective Learning Inventory involves a change in values and techniques found in educational practices.

The following are the examples of learner-centered teaching:

- i. Independent projects and group projects
- ii. Group discussions
- iii. Classroom presentation
- iv. Learning journals
- v. Computer assisted learning.

The teachers and administrators may adopt their own innovative method to make the students learn. For example, the college where I am working presently, the principal keeps the gates closed during the working hours. It may appear to be harsh measure in the beginning, but it becomes a routine. Habits once formed will work like a charm. In course of time the students turn to learning.

Assessment of students often is a part of Learner-centric teaching. In our college, monthly tests are conducted and mark sheets are sent to the parents. These are administrators' contribution to learning.

I would like to offer an example for this method for teaching. If we are teaching Keats' "Ode to Nightingale", make the students involve in the lesson by asking questions. For example, you may pose a question to the class like, what do people do when they are sad or under stress?

Students come out with answers like the following: Watch T.V, eat food, go out, etc. Some may say 'should drink', others may laugh. But the poet says drink is important to overcome sadness and talks about it. After this part, ask the students whether drinking wine makes happy? If not, what to do?

Questions are simple and effective means to involve students to learn effectively.

Conclusion

Learner-centered teaching advocates the idea that students should have input into what is learned, how it is learned and when it is learned (Sparrow, Sparrow and Swan, 2000). The teacher assumes the role of a gardener who watches and nurtures the plants but plants do the growing; he assumes the role of a coach but the players play the game. It is important for the teacher to follow this method to make the learning effective, useful and interesting.

In the teacher-centric approach we concentrate on teaching the content and focus on the teacher's ability to ensure the students to learn the context but pay little attention to the learners by aligning the subject matter with the learners needs. So there is a mismatch between learners and their needs. The result is ineffective and inefficient teaching. Hence, Learner-centric teaching has become the need of the day.

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