

A summary
Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice
Maryellen Weimer, 2013

Learner-centered teaching: A definition

Over the last decade, the principles of learner-centered teaching have gained widespread use throughout all levels and disciplines of education. Unfortunately, as the principles have gained popularity, the definition of learner-centered teaching has become a bit muddled and over simplified. Although strategies like student engagement, active learning and other practices that involve students in their own learning are a necessary component of learner-centered teaching; these practices do not represent the entire philosophy of what it means to be a learner-centered teacher.

According to Weimer (2012), there are five characteristics of learner-centered teaching:

1. Learner-centered teaching engages students in the hard, messy work of learning.

“I believe teachers are doing too many learning tasks for students. We ask the questions, we call on students, we add detail to their answers. We offer the examples. We organize the content. We do the preview and the review. On any given day, in most classes teachers are working much harder than students. I’m not suggesting we never do these tasks, but I don’t think students develop sophisticated learning skills without the chance to practice and in most classrooms the teacher gets far more practice than the students.”¹

As a veterinary educator, you will find a good example and discussion of your role as the teacher beginning at the bottom of pp. 61-62, and *Principle 1: Teachers let students do more learning tasks* pp. 72-74.

2. Learner-centered teaching includes explicit skill instruction.

“Learner-centered teachers teach students how to think, solve problems, evaluate evidence, analyze arguments, generate hypotheses—all those learning skills essential to mastering material in the discipline. They do not assume that students pick up these skills on their own, automatically. A few students do, but they tend to be the

¹ Weimer, M. (2012, August 8). Five characteristics of learner-centered teaching. Retrieved August 4, 2015, from <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/five-characteristics-of-learner-centered-teaching/>

students most like us and most students aren't that way. Research consistently confirms that learning skills develop faster if they are taught explicitly along with the content."¹

Students not only need to develop an understanding of a discipline's knowledge base (content), but they also need to understand how that knowledge is organized and acquired (learning skills). By learning how to solve problems, think critically, apply information, and integrate knowledge, students can learn to think like experts in a discipline. In other words, they not only need to learn content, but they also need to know how they can learn more, which is critical in today's environment where information is easily accessible and exponentially growing. Teachers already possess these skills because they are experts within a discipline, so they often overlook the importance of teaching them to students. Research, however, confirms that students do not automatically learn these skills. Guidelines for helping students develop general learning skills can be found beginning on p. 132.

3. Learner-centered teaching encourages students to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it.

"Learner-centered teachers talk about learning. In casual conversations, they ask students what they are learning. In class they may talk about their own learning. They challenge student assumptions about learning and encourage them to accept responsibility for decisions they make about learning; like how they study for exams, when they do assigned reading, whether they revise their writing or check their answers. Learner-centered teachers include assignment components in which students reflect, analyze and critique what they are learning and how they are learning it. The goal is to make students aware of themselves as learners and to make learning skills something students want to develop."¹

Many of the guidelines for instructing students on how to acquire better learning skills (see #2 above) are also applicable for helping them reflect on how to take responsibility for changing their learning strategies according to their needs.

4. Learner-centered teaching motivates students by giving them some control over learning processes.

"I believe that teachers make too many of the decisions about learning for students. Teachers decide what students should learn, how they learn it, the pace at which they learn, the conditions under which they learn and then teachers determine whether students have learned. Students aren't in a position to decide what content should be included

in the course or which textbook is best, but when teachers make all the decisions, the motivation to learn decreases and learners become dependent. Learner-centered teachers search out ethically responsible ways to share power with students. They might give students some choice about which assignments they complete. They might make classroom policies something students can discuss. They might let students set assignment deadlines within a given time window. They might ask students to help create assessment criteria.”¹

The book we have provided for you provides an excellent discussion about sharing power beginning on p. 94, *Changing the balance of power*. This is followed by classroom examples on pp. 98-108.

5. Learner-centered teaching encourages collaboration.

“It sees classrooms (online or face-to-face) as communities of learners. Learner-centered teachers recognize, and research consistently confirms, that students can learn from, and with, each other. Certainly the teacher has the expertise and an obligation to share it, but teachers can learn from students as well. Learner-centered teachers work to develop structures that promote shared commitments to learning. They see learning individually and collectively as the most important goal of any educational experience.”¹

Refer to p. 81, *Principle 5: Faculty encourage students to learn from and with each other*, for an illustrative example of what collective learning can look like in practice.

Implementing the learner-centered approach

See Chapter 8: Responding to resistance (p. 199)

More than twenty years of research evidence supports learner-centered teaching methods as a path to better student outcomes when compared to traditional, teacher-centric methods. A few of these better student outcomes are:

- Meaningful and long term understanding (Biology example p. 48)
- Engaging in deep learning approaches rather than superficial attempts (pp. 31-33)
- Independent, lifelong learning (p. 34)
- Increased motivation to learn (p. 37)
- Better assessment outcomes, especially with conceptual understanding tests (p.48)

Research has consistently demonstrated that learner-centered teaching practices are more effective than traditional teacher-centered approaches, but unfortunately, the benefits may not be immediate or automatic. Indeed, many teachers find it easier to

revert back to their more comfortable, teacher-centered pedagogies. To increase our chances of successfully implementing learner-centered approaches, it is important we understand the potential obstacles we might face. Interestingly, the primary obstacles or resistance to change come from two groups: students and colleagues.

Students may resist learner-centered approaches

“Unhappy, whining, complaining students can easily get on a teacher’s nerves. Consciously or unconsciously, that’s part of the students’ plan—wear the teacher down and watch her back down. And if she does, they have discovered that resistance works, so you can expect it to increase” (p. 212).

Students may be less than enthusiastic, or even rebellious, when confronted with learner-centered teaching. There are four likely reasons for this resistance, and you may deal with any one or all of them in the classroom. The four most commonly encountered reasons for resistance include:

1. Learner-centered approaches require more work

Students often have an unhealthy attachment to their PowerPoint notes, and for good reason. This method for acquiring knowledge requires minimal mental effort on their part. What if instead of providing a list of examples for a concept in your lecture, you ask the students to turn to a partner and generate their own list of examples? It requires mental effort for them to make the attempt, and what if their examples are wrong? To the students this might feel like effort wasted, when in reality this process helps them learn the content better and provides opportunities for them to confront their own misconceptions about a new concept.

2. Learner-centered approaches are threatening

Keep in mind that for most of a student’s life, she/he has been told what to do and what to know by the teacher in a teacher-centered class environment. Imagine their reaction when they discover that in a learner-centered classroom, the details about: what to do, what the “right answer” is, and who is responsible for what is suddenly less clear than they what they have come to expect. This is quite daunting for them because it is a brand new experience, and the fear of failure in this unfamiliar environment can cause anxiety.

3. Learner-centered approaches involve losses

Learner-centered approaches generate intellectual growth that creates independent thinkers and learners. A learner-centered teaching environment firmly places the responsibility for learning and decision-making on the student. There can be sense of loss when a student realizes she or he must move from a dependent learner to independently making decisions about what is important for her or him to learn, and how in depth a concept should be studied.

4. Some students are not ready for certain learner-centered approaches

Sometimes a student truly is not intellectually ready to become the independent learner that is necessary for him or her to get the most out of learner-centered teaching approaches. If they don't seem to be resistant to more work or responsibility and they do not seem to be afraid, then it may be that they are not intellectually ready to tackle a particular activity. If this is the case, you may need to either revise the activity, or create a bridging experience to prepare them for that activity.

Knowing the sources of resistance can help you formulate a plan for combatting resistance that may occur in your course. For any of these situations, communication is the best first response.

There are many effective ways to communicate your way through student resistance. One way is to explain the rationale behind what you are asking the students to do. Do not assume that students will immediately see the benefits for working through a new assignment or activity. Additional ideas can be found beginning on p. 208.

You will also need to enact strategies that motivate students to accept the responsibility for their learning. For example, one effective strategy is to demonstrate your own personal commitment to learning. If students can occasionally see how their teacher is working through a current problem within their job, they can become more aware of the bigger learning picture beyond just grades. Additional practical actions you can take to motivate students to accept learning responsibility can be found on p. 150.

"Given the reality of student resistance, I don't think you can try learner-centered approaches halfheartedly. You can't be tentative about what you're doing. That only adds fuel to the resistance fire. You may feel like retreating, returning to a safer, saner way of teaching, but when you're working with students all they should see is your unwavering commitment to learner-centered goals. They get a sense of that determination and they back down" (p. 213).

The good news!

Students do come around and begin to appreciate learner-centered teaching approaches. Throughout numerous studies, students typically report struggling initially with the new learner-centered teaching style, but after a little experience in the course, they begin to see the benefits. They even feel that they have more advantageous outcomes compared to the older traditional teaching method (p.54).

“Just as those of us committed to learner-centered approaches cannot return to how we taught before, students also find that they no longer want to learn as they once did. They chafe in classes where there are no choices, no focus on learning, no responsibility or autonomy” (p. 213).

Some methods and actions may work better than others for overcoming student resistance to learner-centered teaching. The key is to not give up. Continue trying new things until you find something that works because students deserve the clear benefits of this educational approach despite their initial resistance..

Colleagues may resist learner-centered teaching

Some faculty and administrators may become alarmed with your learner-centered teaching plans for a variety of reasons (see examples beginning on p. 213). Below are three of the more common reasons your colleagues may not agree with your new approach.

1. One common reason is the belief that you are not “covering” enough content. If you switch your course from a teacher-centered approach to a more learner-centered one, you will need to redefine the role of content. Remember, the role of content in your class is to guide the knowledge base students must acquire, and to provide an opportunity for developing learning skills within that knowledge area (p. 123, *How does content function in a learner-centered course?*). A learner-centered teaching approach **uses** content to accomplish this, while a teacher-centered approach just **covers** all the content that can fit into the course. It is more important that the students learn how to use their acquired knowledge rather than know all the facts presented in the vacuum of a classroom.
2. A second common reason for colleague resistance is the belief that only very advanced and mature students would benefit from this type of teaching practice. Your colleagues may not believe that beginner students can learn enough from these methods and need to be schooled in the basics first. However, this is a widely accepted misconception. Learner-centered approaches can benefit any student despite their educational starting point.

Weimer states:

“When teachers are learner-centered, focused on developing understanding of the material and committed to helping students gain mastery over their learning processes, students learn the material at a deeper level and begin managing their learning in ways that lead to their autonomy and independence as learners” (p. 37).

The research evidence in this book and this statement describes all students, not just advanced learners or continuing education professionals.

3. The third common reason is that faculty can feel threatened when shifting the responsibility for learning to the students. It is difficult, especially for experienced teachers, to let go of complete control in the classroom and share power with students. The nature of learner-centered teaching shifts the balance of power in the classroom. In order for students to learn, they must be given more opportunity and responsibility to engage with the concepts and construct their own understanding.

What does the power shift look like? It does not entail handing all of the power to the students and losing control as a leader. There is a reason you are the teacher. The power shift is more about sharing responsibility for learning with the students. For a better explanation of how this sharing might occur, refer to *Changing the balance of power*, p. 94.

How can you address fears of the power shift? Ask yourself, or your colleagues, the following questions found on p. 88:

- How would you characterize your students?
 - Are they empowered, self-motivated learners who tackle learning tasks with confidence and ingenuity? Often the answer is no.
 - Many students tend to hope the course is easy and worry about what they will do if they run into difficulties. “Most would rather not speak in class and their idea of a good class is one where the teacher tells them exactly what to do” (p. 88).
- Why are so many students anxious, indecisive, and unsure of themselves as learners?
- Is there something about the way we teach that makes students dependent learners, that inhibits their development, making it so they cannot learn unless teachers tell them what and how?

Answering these questions as you and your colleagues examine current teaching practices might provide insight into student behaviors and the role that instructors play in promoting those behaviors.

Weimer's book suggests general, non-specific ways to overcome faculty resistance on p. 214. In addition to the examples she provides, keep in mind there is a plethora of research evidence regarding this approach to learning. Chapters 1 and 2 effectively summarize the last twenty years of educational research that supports learner-centered teaching approaches. It is not only refreshing, but enlightening to know there are many others who have adopted this approach to teaching/learning and have seen the benefits of its implementation. This book can be a great resource for you and your colleagues to review the literature and evidence of support for learner-centered teaching.

Conclusion

There are three take-away messages for this book:

1. Learner-centered approaches are more effective than traditional teacher-centered pedagogy.

More than twenty years of research supports this statement, which begs the question: why haven't things changed? According to a classroom observation study discussed in the book (p. 67), from a group of teachers that trained in learner-centered teaching strategies, nearly 75% **still** implemented lecture-based teacher-centered pedagogies in practice. "Why do outstanding scientists who demand rigorous proof for scientific assertions in their research continue to use, and indeed defend, on the basis of intuition alone, teaching methods that are not the most effective?" (p. 55)

According to the science of teaching and learning, learner-centered approaches are the most effective way to teach students. In order to consider ourselves reputable educators, we should actively use evidence-based practices to inform the way we teach.

2. Evolving to learner-centered approaches can be challenging.
It is human nature to be uncomfortable with change. However, knowing the potential obstacles in advance and planning ahead can help instructors better prepare for implementation of this approach.
3. It takes dedication and ingenuity to adopt learner-centered teaching approaches.
Hopefully this book has demonstrated that although it will require extra effort to begin the path toward learner-centered teaching, it is possible to implement changes and those changes will be well-worth

the effort. Incorporation of learner-centered teaching improves student learning and strengthens academic programs.

As you continue the curriculum review and redesign process, you should consider your responsibility to the students in your program. While programs tend to focus on teaching disciplinary content, we should also recognize the importance of teaching students “how to learn” so they may continue into their profession with life-long learning skills. To best serve our students, we should embrace this approach and encourage a new culture of education based upon **how** students learn not just **what** students learn.