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Five characteristics of learner-centered teaching

Learner-Centered Teaching is a subject about which there is still considerable interest. The learner-centered label now gets attached to teaching strategies, teachers, classes, programs, departments and institutions. Like many trendy descriptors in higher education, with widespread use comes a certain definitional looseness. Active learning, student engagement and other strategies that involve students and mention learning are called learner-centered. And although learner-centered teaching and efforts to involve students have a kind of bread and butter relationship, they are not the same thing. In the interest of more definitional precision, according to Maryellen Weimer's research, I'd like to propose five characteristics of teaching that make it learner-centered.

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.

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 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.

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.

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

Weimer believes 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.

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.

The combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods is used in this study because it can bring new and insightful findings and both kinds are rather complementary than antagonistic¹. Creswell² presents three models of combination of these two approaches. The model carried out in this study is called dominant less-dominant model, in which only a small part of the whole study is realized by qualitative methods and a prevailing part is analyzed quantitatively.

A total of 143 learners of English language participated in this study which took place at a secondary school in Khorezm region. The

¹ Thomas, R. M. Blending qualitative and quantitative research methods in theses and dissertations. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 2003.

² Creswell, J W. Research design: qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thousand Oaks: Sage. 1994.

participants of this study are pupils of 8th and 9th grades of basic schools. The reason why I have chosen this age group is that these pupils already have quite a long experience with learning English and they are able to formulate their own opinions and beliefs. There are 91 pupils from the 8th grade and 52 pupils from the 9th grade. All of these learners responded to the BALLI questionnaire, which was translated into Uzbek language, and 18 pupils from the 9th grade wrote essays on the topic of their beliefs also in their mother tongue.

There are several criteria used for characterizing the participants including their gender and age, their grades and the number of years of studying English language.

The total number of participants includes 77 female pupils and 64 male pupils and two pupils did not fill in their gender. 37 pupils come from a small village school and 106 pupils attend a school in Brno. The mean age of participants is 13,8 years, ranging from 13 to 15 years. The mode is 14 years. The pupils' grades vary from 1-5. The mode grade is 2. The average number of years of studying English language is 6 years.

The average grade of these pupils is 1,9 and the mode grade is 3. The average number of years of studying English language is also 6 years.

