
IN SEARCH OF APPROACHES FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING REVISITED
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LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH/ CHILD-CENTRED LEARNING/ STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING

by

Jairos Gonye

PREAMBLE

This chapter explains the nature of the learner-centred approach, its scope, use and implications to both the teacher and the learner in their supposedly new roles. The learner-centred approach (LCA), sometimes called child-centred learning (CCL) or student-centred learning (SCL), is a response to the traditional, long-established teaching methods and approaches which put the teacher, instructor or lecturer at the centre of all learning or, rather, schooling. Such conventional approaches were informed by the belief that the student came to school to receive knowledge. Since the knowledge was imparted to him or her by teachers and lecturers in meticulously formulated and packaged formats, that had the tendency to suppress child/learner initiative or enquiry. The duty of the child or learner was to be educated, to be exposed to new bodies of knowledge with minimal intellectual contribution of his or her own. In other words, the learner was presented as a passive recipient in a one-way process of education where the teacher or instructor was not only an awfully powerful and inspiring source of knowledge but an unquestioned authority. In such a scenario, little chance was given to attend to individual learner differences, preferences and dislikes, the major consideration being to satisfy only the needs of the one dictating the pace of the learning experience, one who, unfortunately, was

the teacher or lecturer - not the child, the learner. So the questions that the teacher might ask at the end of a teacher-centred approach would be: Have I imparted the knowledge and skills I had planned to impart or not? Have the learners created new knowledge and applied new skills through my minimal facilitation?

However, that would seem to militate against the achievement of the goals of education, taking cognisance of one 'recent' definition of learning as "the process by which an organism, as a result of its interaction in a situation, acquires a new mode of behaviour, which tends to persist and affect the general behaviour pattern of the organism, to some degree"(Kochhar, 2004:24).

Child-Centred or Learner-Centred?

For centuries, the child has been treated as a quiet, receptive person who depended, for knowledge, on the authoritative master. But, even many years back, there emerged a systematic and consistent reaction against that authoritarian view - 'the mug and jug view of education', a reaction that sought to have the nature of the child considered in any teaching situation. The important names in this respect go to as far back as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart, Froebel, Montessori and Dewey. These initiated a reaction against the apparently undemocratic treatment of children and the homogenizing of children's needs that had resulted in rote learning. There was, therefore, a movement towards giving the child some freedom to develop and learn naturally, considering the child's interests and providing motivating and conducive conditions for learning (Kochhar, 2004). These philosophers were, however, more specifically concerned about the child as different from the adolescent or adult learner. The effects of their influential ideas are most evident in, for instance, Montessori's kindergarten.

Though the terms 'child-centred' and 'learner-centred' could be used interchangeably, there are differences because they are informed by different theories. The child-centred approach emerged earlier than the learner-centred approach. In the former, children are/were perceived as having different needs from adolescents and adults since they are by nature different. The comprehensive learner-centred movement as a recent phenomenon is the brainchild of cognitive psychologists and constructivists led by Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky. These scholars identified and explained the important role of language in how the learner makes sense of the world and how the learner uses language to forever (lifelong) organise and restructure his or her experiences in light of already existing experiences (Harmelen, 1998). The learner-centred approach embraced all learners irrespective of age. Be that as it may, both child-centred or learner-centred approaches focused on removing the teacher from the centre of learning and replacing him/her with the child or learner, with emphasis on the learner's activity, initiative and discovery. These approaches are a shift from the behaviourists' stimulus-response view of education to one that sought first to understand the needs of the child. As much as education is about interaction, it (Learner/Child-Centred Approach) "does not want the child to acquire merely the results of other people's thinking. It rather wants him to forge for himself the knowledge and skills necessary to deal effectively with the situation of real life" (Kochhar, 2004:14).

What is the Learner-Centred Approach?

One of the most significant paradigm shifts in the history of education has been the recent shift "from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning" (Rust, 2002:146). This migration from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm de-emphasised rote learning and emphasised lifelong skills, emphasised less

on content taught and more on what students need to achieve in the end. The switch to the learning paradigm neutralised the roles of the instructor, instruction and academic content. Learner-centred education has recently been a policy issue globally, as our example of Namibia will suggest.

Increasingly recently, the aim in education has been to increase student participation in all available teaching approaches, especially those informed by the constructivists and cognitivists such as Piaget and Bruner who, in brief, dismiss the transmission view of acquiring knowledge in favour of the constructivist view whereby "knowledge is not passively received from the world, from others, or from authoritative sources. Rather, all knowledge is created as individuals and groups adapt to and make sense of their experiential worlds" (MacLallen *et al*, 2004:254). The learner-centred approach emphasises construction and reconstruction of knowledge through interaction. As Papert (1986) observes, through interactive manipulation of materials, the learner actively reconstructs rather than passively receive transmitted knowledge.

Across all centres of learning, learners bring expectations, especially to learn, so that they would go into the world well-armed to sustain themselves. For learning institutions such as universities, it became necessary to shift from more organisational input-oriented curricula design, based on the description of course content, to outcome-based higher education (Attard *et al,* 2010:6). Learner-centred education at university level allows students to participate enthusiastically in their subjects, improve their skills such as discipline, knowledge, collaboration and communication. Students eventually interact more amongst themselves as well as with administration.

In a similar vein, Brandes *et al* (1986:12) note that:

> With student-centred learning, students are responsible for planning the curriculum or, at least, they participate in the choosing... [T]he individual is 100 percent responsible for his own behaviour, participation and learning.

Machemer and Crawford (2007) also conceive student-centred learning (SCL) as an experience that puts the student/learner at the centre of learning and teaching. This implies making the curriculum flexible and designing it with learner interests and capabilities at heart, hence a deliberate movement away from the conventional methods (Attard *et al,* 2010).

Scholars are, however, not agreed on the definitions and distinctions of child-centred, student-centred learning or learner-centerd approach, hence the apparently interchangeable terms 'child-centred', 'student-centred' and 'learner-centred' adopted in this chapter. All, nonetheless, agree that the 'child', 'student' or 'learner' is "at the heart of the learning process." Though the learner "is the focal point of the process, the role of the teacher remains paramount, particularly when one considers that students are not all the same" (Attard *et al,* 2010:8). By comparison, traditional schooling "tends to consider students as passive receptors of information, without consideration of the need to actively participate in the learning process" (Attard *et al,* 2010:8). Here, the teacher, his or her notes and his or her oral perorations are the sources of knowledge. Sadly, there is no enquiry encouraged since students respond to questions and do not ask questions themselves. By and large, traditional methods were examination-oriented. Learning was devoid of positive motivation but for the fear of low grades. In reality, there was no cooperation but competition.

According to MacLellan and Soden (2004:254), the traditional lecture method or transmission teaching was based on "lecturing, note-taking, and memorising information for later recognition or reproduction." On the contrary, student-centred learning gives students the chance to chart their own learning paths, placing upon them the onus to make their educational process a success. So, instead of passively receiving knowledge, students actively and independently participate in their learning (Machemer and Crawford, 2007). In student-centred learning, students are taught how to think, not what to think!

Learner-centred approach, as linked to lifelong learning, gained currency globally in the 1990s, following the Dakar Framework for Global Action, a framework which initiated debate and commitment to implement Education For All (EFA) through accessibility, equity and quality. This was seen as one way of dealing with the challenges and opportunities of the multiplying, knowledge-driven economies. Learner-centred approaches were, therefore, useful from the kindergarten through primary and secondary school to college, university and adult literacy institutes. The Namibian case has shown how the government has, since 1993, tried to implement the learner-centred approach in its schools in line with the EFA thrust. In the Namibian policy document, Toward Education For All (1993), emphasis and commitment to access, equity, quality and democracy in education were also reflected. Namibian schools were expected to be facilitators and not barriers to learning, places that promoted personalised learning and shunned rote learning. This was in a context where the government had realised that:

> Rote memorisation and repetition can stifle curiosity. Punitive discipline can discourage innovation, experimentation and critique. Unchallenged learners can become bored and bored learners lose motivation to follow and join in class activities. When teachers disrespect learners, the learners come to have little respect for themselves.
>
> (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993:34)

The Namibian government emphasised learning and not mere schooling since "schooling without learning may lead to diplomas and certificates but, for many students, it leads to frustration and self-doubt. Learning, in school or out, leads not only to individual achievements, but also to self-reliance, self-confidence, and empowerment" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993:34). Learner-centred approaches would also ensure gender equity and improved quality in terms of curriculum, teacher, materials and environment.

In Zimbabwe, one of the hitches for an effective implementation of learner-centred approaches are the generally large classes in primary and, secondary schools and even university level. Mapako *et al* (2011) have pointed out some of the sustainability challenges attendant to mass education, coming as a result of the implementation of Education- For All programme, especially at Zimbabwean universities. However, these problems point all the more to the necessity of liberating the teacher from an erstwhile domination and a foregrounding of the learner. According to the Namibian learner-centred education policy document, "learner-centred education involves a more democratic pedagogy and a more democratic school" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993:2). A democratic pedagogy and school entail planning and ensuring an enabling curriculum, activities, environment and resources, assessment criteria and procedures. All this calls for innovative stakeholders. Innovative teachers lead to innovative students. To ensure innovation and that teachers are kept abreast of current practices, governments are challenged to satisfy the need for refresher courses and professional in-service development for teachers (Trowler and Bamber, 2005).

The shift from the traditional teacher-centred, rote learning approaches has also been experienced in adult education. Milano and Ulius (1998) have discussed the implications of learner-centred approaches at adult training institutions. They argue that learner-centred approaches are empowering to the learner in every sense. They also say that in adult training institutes there is a need to shift from education to training, where education " focuses on learning about" while training "focuses on learning how." As already hinted, the roles of both the teacher and the learner are changed. The learner is transformed from the passive gobbler of facts to a constructor of knowledge and the teacher from a frothing transmitter of knowledge to a facilitating guide. Birchall and Smith (1999:357) have suggested some interesting procedures for trainers (adult learning) who want to pursue learner-centred approaches, make use of 'authentic' learning tasks that are meaningful to the learner; make use of discovery learning methods where the learner constructs his or her own understanding rather than imbibe the instruction of the teacher and make use of collaborative and problem-solving learning methods.

Advantages of the Learner-Centred Approach

What are the innovative methods available to the teacher? Apparently, learner-centred approaches are the ones that promote personalised learning as well as teamwork/groupwork, problem-solving, discovery and role-play. These are the methods through which students do not necessarily wait for examinations in order to regurgitate what they have learned because, in the learner-centred approach, students practically and critically make use of the acquired knowledge.

Jones (2007) uses examples from a secondary school setting to clarify the advantages of learner-centred approaches to language learning. According

to Jones (2007:2), "the teacher (and the textbook) help to guide the students, manage their activities, and direct their learning. Being a teacher means helping people to learn and, in a student-centred class, the teacher is a member of the class as a participant in the learning process." The implications are that, with minimum teacher interference, the student should be prepared to work alone in making notes, preparing assignments, doing language exercises and also doing pair work and groupwork, discussion and role-play. The teacher will be there to initiate the discussions and interactions, supervise activities and offer feedback. Summarising what happens in a learner-centred language lesson in a secondary school, Jones (2007:2) notes that:

> In a student-centred class, students don't depend on their teacher all the time, waiting for instructions, words of approval, correction, advice, or praise. They don't ignore each other, but look at each other and communicate with each other. They value each other's contributions; they cooperate, learn from each other, and help each other. When in difficulty or in doubt, they do ask the teacher for help or advice but only after they have tried to solve the problem among themselves.

In such cases, there is individual, pair and groupwork and whole class activities that would facilitate development of language and communication skills. A student-centred classroom has benefits for both students and the education system as a whole, hence they are of national significance. Through personalised learning, the learner-centred approach promotes student autonomy and puts accountability for learning fully on the learner. Zimmerman (2002) has suggested that a student geared for learner-centred learning is initiated into acting responsibly and proactively, beginning with matters such as setting of own goals and designing a personal study timetable and in monitoring personal performance. In this highly technological or digital world, "student-centred learning and mobility will help students to develop the

competences they need in a changing labour market and will empower them to become active and responsible citizens" (Bologna Process, 2009:1).

Milano and Ullius (1998:24-25) recognise that in the training of adults, "personal experience is the key learning tool." The advantage is that a learner-centred approach acknowledges that adult learners bring a wealth of experiences to any learning situation. Adult learners will filter anything learned through their personal experience filters much more than children. Generally, learners have something they already know, so instead of treating learners as if they knew nothing (empty vessels), teachers should assist them acquire new knowledge through relating new knowledge to prior experiences. 'McDaniel and Brown (2001:92) observe that learner-centred approaches are beneficial for they encourage each trainee or participant to take a more active role, analyse his or her performance objectives and work closely with the trainer towards achieving those goals. They warn that if the sessions are trainer-centred, "participants inevitably play a more passive role. In such cases, the total responsibility for the outcomes is shifted to the trainer, leaving the learners in a somewhat uncertain position."

Critique

Whether it be 'child-centred', 'student-centred' or 'learner-centred' approach, the significance is that the child or learner should be given the initiative to cause his or her learning in a relatively free and autonomous atmosphere. However, educators should not expect too much from learners, especially young learners, and too much from every learner. There is a need to avoid treating all learners across the age continuum as equal to the challenges of learner-centred approaches. There are individual differences as there are limitations as to what younger learners can do by themselves as

compared to adult learners. Therefore, the degrees of autonomy should be given to learners in a kind of sliding scale from kindergarten, through primary school, secondary school to college/university and adult training institutions. For instance, while a postgraduate student can be expected to create new knowledge with minimum supervision, a high school student could still do the same but with more teacher intervention. Again, that teacher influence and dominance is eliminated seems an illusion since more is expected from the teacher in terms of planning and arranging for an enabling content structure, activities, suitable methods, motivation, management of learning and overall evaluation of the learning.

Conclusion

A misconception about this new learning paradigm is that the teacher will be rendered irrelevant, redundant or rusty. In fact, the teacher's role has never been so important as now, for the teacher has to ensure an enabling environment that promotes cooperative learning and whose efficacy is easy to assess is availed. Abel *et al* (2009) say that in such circumstances the teacher becomes a coach who inspires a culture of collaboration and co-operation in classrooms which have less of lectures and more of supervision. In essence, the learner-centred approach has occasioned only a shift of power for the teacher, not an emasculation. As Kochhar (2004:15) has observed, it has allowed the teacher to step down "from the pedestal of a dictator" to being their "guide and friend." It strives for a warm, mutual and educationally fruitful student-teacher relationship. It becomes apparent that one does not have to be inside school walls to start learning, nor does one's learning stop as soon as one leaves the school environs. Current thinking suggests that learning begins before, and continues after school and, therefore, teachers should not interrupt lifelong learning but should actually facilitate its flow through observing some of the following:

Teachers need to avoid verbatim recitals of textbooks and drills; teachers need to engage the whole child's attention and participation; teachers should guide learners through helpful learning experiences; and teachers need to design learnable curriculum.

In addition, the facts and skills that students are exposed to should be eventually geared for child's development because, even though the learner still "needs lectures and demonstrations", he or she will only become skilled when he or she "begins to participate" (Kochhar, 2004). Therefore, there is a need for a definite change of paradigm, a need which beckons yet other needs; the need to upgrade oneself academically and professionally in order to keep abreast with current demands and trends; the need to try new and unfamiliar approaches to classroom teaching and management, and the need to reflect and evaluate one's strategies and objectives.

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GROUPWORK

by

Tsitsi Nyoni

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on one of the most commonly used methods in teaching-learning situations. Petty (2009) succinctly points this out by positing that it is an adaptable and powerful teaching strategy with marked advantages, hence its being an essential feature of almost all modern teaching. However, popular as it might be, there are a number of areas that classroom practitioners need to constantly be reminded of if its use has to bear fruits. Thus, the discussion starts with a definition of groupwork, followed by when the method is used, the teacher's role during groupwork is spelt out, advantages and limitations of the method are highlighted and, finally, how groupwork can be assessed.

What is Groupwork

It is the organisation of pupils into small groups to work on a class task, assignment or project. The teacher can group learners for groupwork in various ways. He/she can group them according to ability (ability grouping) which is "the practice of dividing students for instruction on the basis of their perceived capacities for learning" http://www.sharingsuccess.org/codeby/ability grouping. pdf. accessed 22/06/2012). If the teacher does this within his/her class, this is called within class grouping and the students