

Student Centered Learning

The core of our teaching: A Student-Centered Approach

Student centered teaching lies at the core of any effective classroom. Any teaching method, any instructional material, and any activity must be evaluated on its use of student centered principles if we want these methods, materials, and activities to teach students effectively. The core principle of our workshop, then, is that every technique we advocate will lead to a more effective student centered environment. We promote authentic instruction, cooperative learning, active learning, and cognitive apprenticeship not only for their instructional benefits, but also for their ability to put students at the center of their own learning -- for their ability to give students effective control.

What is student centered teaching?

In student centered teaching, we center our planning, our teaching, and our assessment around the needs and abilities of our students. The main idea behind the practice is that learning is most meaningful when topics are relevant to the students' lives, needs, and interests and when the students themselves are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge. Students will have a higher motivation to learn when they feel they have a real stake in their own learning. Instead of the teacher being the sole, infallible source of information, then, the teacher *shares* control of the classroom and students are allowed to explore, experiment, and discover on their own. The students are not just memorizing information, but they are allowed to work with and use the information alone or with peers. Their diverse thoughts and perspectives are a necessary input to every class. The students are given choices and are included in the decision-making processes of the classroom. The focus in these classrooms is on options, rather than uniformity. Essentially, "learners are treated as co-creators in the learning process, as individuals with ideas and issues that deserve attention and consideration.

Why do we want to promote student centered teaching? What are its benefits?

- Student centered teaching helps us design effective instruction for every member of the classroom, no matter what his or her diverse learning needs. By its nature, student centered teaching is adaptable to meet the needs of every student. In order to design any lesson, the teacher must first think of the students, rather than the content, and so we are assured that the students' needs are being considered.
- Student centered teaching has been proven effective in its ability to teach students the material they need to know. There are site numerous studies that followed students who were taught in the student centered approach that found that not only does student motivation increase, but actual learning and performance do as well. Students taught in a student centered classroom retain more material for longer periods of time. In order to learn, the brain cannot simply receive information; it must also process the information so that it can be stored and recalled. The active nature of the student centered approach helps students actually work with information, and therefore learn it and store it.
- For foreign language students, especially, the student-centered method has special benefits. When students use the language, they retain it more than if they would simply hear it. They get practice in actively producing meaningful conversation and they take a

more direct route to fluency than they would take, for example, if they filled out worksheets with sentences created by the teacher.

- The creativity inherent in student-centered activities adds an element of surprise to each class, and foreign language students tend to bore less often. As a result, even through foreign language learning can be frustrating and intimidating the students stay engaged and willing to learn.
- Even beyond learning what they need to know, students benefit from a less academic side effect of student centered teaching -- they learn how to feel good about themselves. As they take on new responsibilities and succeed with these responsibilities, they come to gain confidence in themselves as competent problem-solvers. Even more, research shows that students have higher achievement when they have confidence in themselves and when they attribute success to their own abilities and not to luck or help. In a student centered approach, it is the students themselves who are responsible for the success of a lesson and therefore they tend to feel more responsible for the success of their own learning.

How can we create student centered teaching?

In order to allow students to gain this power in the class, teachers cannot simply lecture and let students take a passive role. They must design activities that let students take initiative and that let students discover meaningful information for their own lives. They must also get to know the kids on an individual basis so that they can better respond to the individual needs and interests of the students. In general, teachers need to focus on the student's needs, abilities, and interests -- they need to "look at how kids learn, rather than at what there is to teach.

How do authentic learning, active learning, cooperative learning, and cognitive apprenticeship promote a student centered environment?

These approaches all, in one way or another, let the students' needs and interests determine what they will learn. Even more, these approaches let the students themselves decide how they will learn this material.

- Cooperative learning lets kids work off of each other's abilities and knowledge. Here, the emphasis is placed on the kids rather than on the teacher.
- Active learning hinges on the student's participation in the learning process in order for it to be effective.
- Authentic learning ensures that lessons are directly applicable to the students' own lives -- to their needs and their desires.
- Cognitive apprenticeship puts students in control of the direction of their learning. They are guided by a coach who can help them meet their own goals.

How is thematic instruction student centered?

At the heart of our thematic approach lies the students' interests. We arrange our instruction on what the students, themselves, have told us they want to learn.

An example of student centered approach:

We start any unit by asking the students what they want to learn about in that unit. If they want to learn about golf, for example, we would create a foreign language unit based on the various aspects of golf. We would take their suggestions about the different vocabulary they think they would need to know, and we would also let them do a lot of the work in planning how they want to learn in the unit (if they want to be responsible for presenting information, for example, or if they want to take a field trip to a golf course). Within the unit, we will also be sure to incorporate all of the material that we must cover according to state and district standards (we can include "-er" verb conjugations in a French class, for example, when we study the verbs that we need to use when playing golf. The kids, in this unit, will be learning the material they need to know in a way that is relevant to their own interests. Even more, they are motivated to learn because they have a stake in designing and planning their own learning.

Why do we need to teach student centered principles in a workshop for teachers?

Studies have shown that although many more methods classes for beginning teachers are teaching about the student centered process, many new teachers still tend to use traditional techniques despite the more progressive views they may have adapted in college. They are overwhelmed by the rigor of the job, and they tend to feel vulnerable, so they retreat to the more familiar form of lecture. If student teachers come to learn not only the philosophical theory, but also learn explicitly how to implement the theory in practice, however, the method becomes more comfortable, natural, and nearly second nature.

Main Sources:

<http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/step/ep301/Fall2000/Tochonites/active.html>

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Office of Faculty and Instructional Development

Tel: 485 2505- 485 2914

Email: ofid@qu.edu.qa