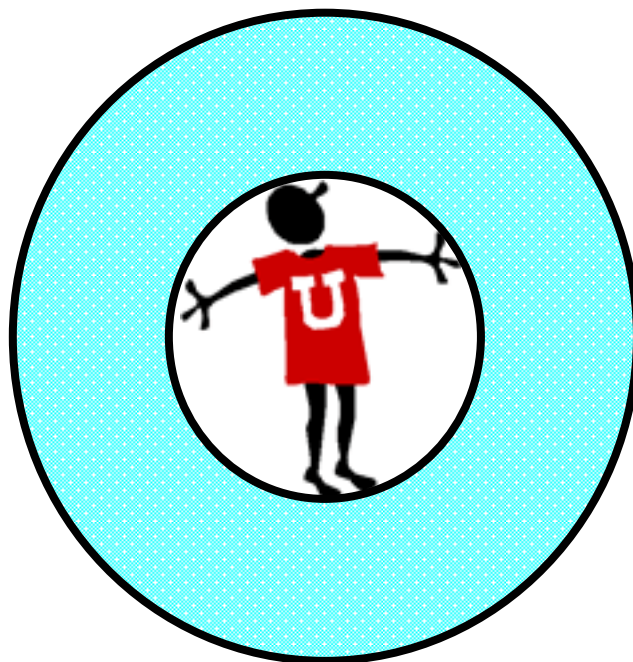


## **What is Student Centred Learning?**



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# What is Student-centred Learning?

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## 1: Introduction

One of the contradictions of the current HE system in the UK is its drive towards becoming a 'mass' system (with its increasingly quantitatively and qualitatively diversified student population), while being concerned with implementing a teaching and learning environment that puts the students' experience at the centre. Under the pressures of such a contradiction we often make fast and unconsidered choices about our teaching, paying lip-service to 'Student-centred Learning'. Thus, for instance, some people think (erroneously), that this means engaging students in some occasional pair-work or having them present their work (but often without clear instructions and a sense of audience). By taking such actions it is believed that we have 'done one's bit' as far as 'Student-centred Learning' goes! However, promoting this kind of learning means much more than this, as we shall see below.

Thinking in 'Student-centred' terms should be at the heart of our educational efforts, and not because managers and politicians think it is a good idea. As lecturers, it is our responsibility to care about our students' effective learning. This is central to our profession: no university can exist without students and students will only keep coming if we build our institutional reputation on both solid research and strong pedagogical bases. Moreover, teaching/learning have been traditionally paramount in our institution and it is a main objective of our Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy and Strategy. In the light of this, it is important to reflect on what it is generally meant by Student-centred Learning and think about what role(s) as lecturers we can have in implementing this in informed and principled ways so that we can promote good (and even memorable) learning experiences for our students.

This is only a first, very short introduction to the topic of 'Student-centred Learning'. It will be followed by some research being currently undertaken by the EIC on it. In order to clarify some of the meanings of Student-centred Learning, I shall compare it with more traditional ways of conceiving teaching, what usually goes under the name of 'Teacher-centred Learning'. This may help to 'demystify' and clarify notions of 'Student-centred Learning' and look at it in more realistic ways. The bibliographical references at the end of this

document are meant for those who wish to learn more about 'Student-centredness' and its theoretical foundations. It is useful to start by comparing the teacher-centred and student-centred models. However, note that these are two 'pure' models which, in most cases, are not typical of what most staff do. A blended, eclectic approach is usually the rule.

## 2: In Teacher-centred Approaches.....

- Teachers serve as the centre of knowledge, directing the learning process and controlling student's access to information. The focus is almost exclusively on what is learnt.
- Students are viewed as 'empty' vessels and learning is viewed as an additive process.
- Consequently, there is no (or little) attempt to take into account students' previous and/or implicit knowledge, that is to say what learners may know already (even though 'imperfectly' or 'erroneously') about the subject(s) of their study.
- Teaching is geared for the 'average' student and everyone is forced to progress at the same rate.
- Assessment takes the form of traditional exams. These aim at making the students 'prove' that they have accumulated facts and information illustrated during a given course of study (without taking much care about whether students are able to process these into 'knowledge' which is 'usable' and 'transferable' in both their professional and personal lives).
- Syllabi and curricula are both discipline and product-based. They portray knowledge as 'cumulative' and leave little or no space for the processes through which information is translated into 'knowledge'.

In terms of **learning outcomes** this means:

- Discipline-specific oral information as the main focus of the teaching-learning encounters.
- Lower order thinking skills (e.g. recall, identify, define) that allow students to pass summative assessment based on the regurgitation of 'facts'.
- Memorisation of abstract and isolated facts, figures and formulas.

The teacher prescribes learning goals and objectives based on his/her prior experiences, past practices and state and/or locally mandated standards.

In terms of **teaching strategies** these are prescribed by the teacher and are based on two main principles:

- Group-paced, designed for the 'average' student.
- Information organised and presented primarily by teacher, (e.g. lectures, with some supplemental reading assignments).

### **The teacher:**

- Organises and presents information to groups of students.
- Acts as gatekeeper of knowledge, controlling students' access to information.
- Directs learning.

### **The student:**

- Expects teachers to teach them what is required to pass a series of assessments.
- Is a passive recipient of information.
- Simply reconstructs knowledge and information, without necessarily understanding it.

### **The learning environment:**

- Students sit in rows.
- Information is presented via lectures, books and films and, increasingly, via media like PowerPoint (which often encourages a bullet-point, superficial approach to learning).

## **3: In Student-centred Approaches.....**

- Students are not considered to be empty vessels. They come with their own perceptual frameworks.
- Focus is not just on what is taught but on **how** effective learning should be promoted
- Student learning becomes the main preoccupation of the teacher (not his/her performance as a teacher or a raw number of facts to be transmitted to the students).
- It is recognized that students learn in different ways and have different learning styles. Personalised/individualised responses are encouraged. This helps to foster creativity in students.
- Learning is recognized as an active dynamic process in which connections (between different facts, ideas and processes) are constantly changing and their structure is continually reformatted. Such connections are fostered through dialogue between teacher and students, and students with their peers. This makes 'Student-centred Learning' a highly social enterprise that requires the constant development of human relationships and communication. Students are constantly encouraged to formulate and re-formulate their hypotheses in the solution of problems and tasks they work on.
- Students construct their own meaning by talking, listening, writing, reading, **and** reflecting on content, ideas, issues and concerns.
- Assessment is 'formative' in character. This means that its main aim is not to 'quantify' a student's performance in terms of the number of 'facts' they are supposed to acquire but understanding (and helping them to understand) the processes through which they arrive at certain

conclusions in solving a given task/problem. In this way, the student is supported in making sense of their 'journey' through knowledge construction. Constructive and continuous feedback is paramount here. Students work with teachers to define performance criteria and develop self-and peer assessment skills.

- Syllabi and curricula are organised not just around the 'facts' the learner is supposed to acquire but around the processes through which learning is to be developed. In the most radical 'student-centred' syllabi/curricula, these are 'constructed' jointly by teachers and students.

In terms of **learning outcomes** this means:

- An emphasis on interdisciplinary knowledge.
- A vigorous encouragement of higher order thinking and information skills, e.g. problem-solving, access, organisation, interpretation and communication of knowledge.

Students work with teachers to select learning goals and objectives based on authentic problems and students' prior knowledge, interests and experience.

In terms of **teaching strategies**, these are based on the following main tenets:

- The teacher works with students to determine the learning strategies.
- These strategies are self-paced and designed to meet the needs of individual students.
- The student is given direct access to multiple sources of information (e.g. books, online databases, community members) and helped to solve a problem/task by making principled and informed use of these resources.

#### **The teacher:**

- Acts as facilitator, helps students access and process information. This may mean 'less' work in class (as students are directed to solve carefully constructed tasks by themselves and in collaboration with their peers, under the teacher's supervision) but more work outside the class to prepare for the class and evaluate students' work

#### **The student:**

- Takes responsibility for learning.
- Is an active knowledge seekers.
- Constructs knowledge by interacting both with his/her teachers and the data gathered through different sources, with the purpose in mind of solving a problem/task that they have been given.

### The learning environment:

- Students work at stations with access to multiple resources.
- Students work individually at times but often also need to collaborate in small groups, under the teacher's supervision.

## 4: Commentary

Having highlighted the differences between a 'teacher-centred and a 'student-centred' approach to learning, some considerations are in order, given the controversial and contested applicability of 'student-centred learning' in a mass HE system:

- First of all, it is worth pointing out that 'teacher-centred' and 'student-centred' learning' are not simply methods, nor strategies. They are philosophical paradigms that reflect different views about the contested nature of 'learning', 'teaching' and 'knowledge'. This means that any choice we decide to make, according to either paradigm, must be informed and consistent, not just a 'one-off' activity to make quality agencies 'happy'. Electing to move from 'teacher-centredness' to 'student-centredness' implies two main shifts: a) from simply thinking about **what** we teach to **how** and **why** we teach something (what/how/why are the three words that should be at the top of our preoccupations when engaging with teaching/learning); b) from thinking about our performance as teachers to thinking about the learning processes the students should go through in order to learn effectively. Making such a shift is not always easy and requires much thought and work!
- Secondly **'teacher-centred learning' and 'student-centred learning' are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, they constitute a continuum.** The choice will be dictated by contextual factors. In a mass HE system, like the one we currently work in, it may be that applying the tenets of student-centred learning in their most radical forms may not be always possible. Pragmatism may have to prevail, especially when we are faced with teaching 'mega modules'. Thus, lecturing may be, at times, the aptest and most economical response. However, even when organising a lecture, we should make every effort to make it as 'student-centred' as possible (by interlacing our talk and thoughts with those of the students – by asking them to provide illustrative examples, for instance, or by giving them mini-tasks to do in the course of the lecture – see bibliography). Concurrently, different ways should be promoted for making students interact more actively with ideas and information, beyond lectures. In this sense, task/problem-based workshops and seminars are the best ones, as they allow students to engage actively with one another (and, whenever possible, interdisciplinarily), with a variety of sources using different skills, in the attempt to solve a given problem (see bibliography).

- Student-centred learning is not simply about classroom interaction. As we have seen, it has implications for curriculum and syllabus design, and assessment. In this sense, it requires a whole change of culture within an institution. Syllabus and curricula should be considered from the point of view of the students' entry knowledge. As importantly processes of learning should be taken into consideration as much as the content to be 'taught'.
- For this reason, continuous academic and professional development is paramount. Good practice should be identified and brought to teaching and learning fora, school and departmental discussion groups, course team meetings for discussion. It is only by engaging with the practice of other colleagues (for instance, through peer-observation, the literature on teaching and learning etc) that meaningful changes can be achieved.
- It is also important to engage with students in order to discuss (and, whenever possible, research) how they perceive their teaching/learning environments. This allows teachers to be sensitive to the actual individuals they have in front of them, with their different personalities, backgrounds, learning styles, values and expectations. At the same time it makes students understand the rationale behind a given teaching style. This is very important as it gives students 'hooks' on which to base their learning. It also deals with the danger that students may not take 'student-centred learning' as seriously as 'teacher-centred' learning simply because they have been accustomed to thinking of the latter as 'serious university teaching'! Discussing teaching may subtract a little time from the syllabus content but may go a long way promoting effective learning.

Finally, as teachers, we should avoid seeing 'student-centred learning' as a 'quality' imposition on the part of governments and institutions, as it should really be at the centre of our preoccupations as educators. If done properly and with a collective effort among peers, 'student-centred learning' can be one way of re-appropriating our own professionalism in the face of fast, top-down changes

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In writing this document, I made use of the following website:  
[Elearning@bath](mailto:Elearning@bath)  
[http://www.bath.ac.uk/e-learning/student\\_centredness.htm](http://www.bath.ac.uk/e-learning/student_centredness.htm)

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 EIC  
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