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STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING: REASONS FOR SUCCESS

Current developments in higher education call for innovative actions. New information and communication technologies are becoming more and more integrated in the higher education provision. One of the examples of true educational innovation is the student-centered design and practices that are rapidly making their way into colleges and universities in both classrooms and e-learning environments.

Background

Student-centered learning is an approach to education, which aims at overcoming some of the problems inherent to more traditional forms of education by focusing on the learner and their needs, rather than being centered around the teacher's input. Traditionally instructors focused on what they did, and not on what the students are learning. This emphasis on what instructors do often leads to students who are passive learners and who did not take responsibility for their own learning. Educators call this traditional method, "instructor-centered teaching." In contrast, "learner-centered teaching" occurs when instructors focus on student learning.

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.

Advantages of Learner-centered teaching over Instructor-centered teaching

Strong, research evidence exists to support the implementation of learner-centered approaches instead of instructor-centered approaches (P. Alexander, P. Blumberg L. Jones, P. Murphy., W. D. Johnson, S. Coffman, M. Weimer, R. Wright and others). P. Blumberg summarizes the following five domains:

1. The knowledge base. The conclusive result of decades of research on knowledge base is that what a person already knows largely determines what new information he attends to, how he organizes and represents new information, and how he filters new experiences, and even what he determines to be important or relevant.

2. Strategic processing and executive control. The ability to reflect on and regulate one's thoughts and behaviors is an essential aspect of learning. Successful students are actively involved in their own learning, monitor their thinking, think about their learning, and assume responsibility for their own learning.

3. Motivation and affect. The benefits of learner-centered education include increased motivation for learning and greater satisfaction with school; both of these outcomes lead to greater achievement.

4. Development and individual differences. Individuals progress through various common stages of development, influenced by both inherited and environmental factors. Depending on the context or task, changes in how people think, believe, or behave are dependent on a combination of one's inherited abilities, stages of development, individual differences, capabilities, experiences, and environmental conditions.

5. Situation or context. Theories of learning that highlight the roles of active engagement and social interaction in the students' own construction of knowledge strongly support this learner-centered paradigm. Learning is a social process. Many environmental factors including how the instructor teaches, and how actively engaged

the student is in the learning process positively or negatively influence how much and what students learn [1].

Teacher's role

Students can't be "taught" – they can only be helped to learn. In a student-centered classroom, teacher's role is to help and encourage students to develop their skills, but without relinquishing our more traditional role as a source of information, advice, and knowledge. Teachers are the ones who make decisions on how the work should be divided into manageable chunks and build on each other in a graded manner. Also, they set the deadlines for the completion of each component as timing is an important factor and the majority of the students do not have well-developed time-management skills. Teachers are also "counsellors" as they constantly provide feedback and advice on the section of the work that the students have completed, within and outside class. They give feedback on various aspects of the students' work, such as its content, organisation, grammar and vocabulary. Last but not least, they are "facilitators". They provide opportunities for guided-practice in class for the skills that the students will employ outside class, individually. They introduce research techniques and methods and give information on certain aspects of writing research projects.

As L. Jones mentions: "At different times in a lesson, our role may change as the lesson moves from teacher-led to student-centered and back again. We're responsible for helping students work independently, monitoring them while they're working together, and giving them feedback afterward. In a whole-class activity, students and the teacher interact, and students accept the authority of the teacher as their manager. When working together, students will be responsible for their own behavior and learning while the teacher walks around the classroom monitoring [2, 25]. "

The success of this practice at colleges and universities around the world indicates that by adapting a more student-oriented approach to education, the students will enjoy a more positive learning experience which will likely help them develop

greater passion for learning and lead to more success in their learning endeavours. As well, this approach involves students in their overall education, creating a proactive involvement in learning.

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