

# Student-Centered Learning

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When the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly switched its employees to remote work, Netflix trained its executives on three habits to help lead teams effectively in a virtual environment. Naphtali Bryant, the director of learning and organization development, said the training added "extreme value," but it wasn't done by sending everyone the same lesson (LinkedIn Learning, 2021). "To get execs engaged, don't do a one-size-fits-all approach, do a one-size-fits-one approach," he said (LinkedIn Learning, 2021).

This is an example of student-centered learning. In addition to engagement, it can improve training, worker efficiency, and productivity. For these reasons, I propose our department utilize student-centered learning on the job and establish a professional development program, which incorporates student-centered learning strategies. This report will provide more information about what student-centered learning is, its theoretical foundations, its advantages and disadvantages, and what it could look like in the workplace.

### **What is Student-Centered Learning?**

In contrast to traditional learning, student-centered learning changes the teacher's role from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side." As the name implies, the student is at the center of the learning approach. However, apart from that, definitions have varied. In an interview, journalist Katrina Schwartz mentioned a student's choice of which chair to sit on was heralded as example of student-centered learning (Richmond, 2016).

This report will focus on a definition which aims to eliminate furniture and other general items as part of student-centered learning. Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy defined student-centered learning as "an approach to learning in which learners choose not only what to study but also how and why" (2010). The Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute stated a student-centered learning environment is where "teachers and students work collaboratively to co-create a learning plan or pathway that best suits the needs of each individual learner" (2020).

However, neither of these definitions include assessment, so this report will use the definition provided on the International Society for Technology in Education (ITSE) website. The ITSE website states student-centered learning is when "planning, teaching, and assessment centers around the needs and abilities of students" (2014).

### **Theoretical Foundations of Student-Centered Learning**

Student-centered learning has connections to constructivist theory and andragogy. Sabine Hoidn wrote, "(T)here is a broad consensus that (student-centered learning) is rooted in a constructivist view of learning and instruction that puts the student at the heart of the learning process and unfolds a broad spectrum of participation-oriented teaching and learning practices to support deep conceptual understanding" (2018, p. 4).

In andragogy, Malcolm Knowles states the importance of taking the learner's background into account and allowing self-direction (*Andragogy (Malcolm Knowles)*, 2018). The andragogy principles also include involving the learner in planning and evaluation, which is mentioned in the ITSE definition of student-centered learning.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Student-Centered Learning**

Like other learning approaches, student-centered learning is not without its criticisms. A common one is the idea of students planning what they need to learn. In "A Critique of Student Centered Classrooms", Jon Bergmann wrote, "students often don't know what they don't know" (2015a). A second issue mentioned is students' motivation. How can an effective lesson be centered around people who don't want to learn it?

Those are valid concerns when student-centered learning is taking to the extreme of the student having total control over a lesson. That is not the definition being used in this report. Teachers are not being eliminated from the process. Teachers are guides, and part of that is connecting the lesson to the students' needs, which would provide their motivation.

The Netflix example at the start of this report mentioned how student-centered learning helped with engagement. Research involving student-centered learning in science lessons showed deeper learning achieved (Granger et al., 2012). In addition to that, student-centered learning was credited with closing an opportunity gap for students at four schools in California (Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, 2014). With students playing a role in their learning, the approach can also be empowering to the learners. The advantages of student-centered learning outweigh the disadvantages.

### **What does Student-Centered Learning Mean in your Workplace or Field?**

A student-centered learning approach would help the department identify any skill gaps and help address it, as well as set a foundation to build new skills as needed. A recommendation on starting a student-centered learning professional development program is having learners create a personal performance plan, where they identify their strengths, weaknesses, and professional development interests. This has students involved in the planning and fosters buy-in for the program. In addition to that, it gives managers insight into skill gaps and opens communication about professional development. This dialogue will be an opportunity for learners, teachers, and managers to connect training with work tasks and determine proper assessments for the lessons. Learners' involvement in this development would motivate them to complete the lessons.

With learning focused on the student, this would also help department personnel who already have packed calendars. Student-centered learning would take each learner's availability into consideration when planning lessons. In addition to that issue, current personnel's knowledge and skill levels vary. It is already difficult to find a training where all learners are starting at the same level. Student-centered learning would allow a learner to build on their current skill level, instead someone else's.

### **Summary**

Student-centered learning and a professional development program using that approach would benefit the department with improved worker engagement, increased productivity, and deeper learning. Student-centered learning may be broadly defined as an approach focusing on the student's needs and abilities. But for the purpose of this department, a student's involvement in planning and assessment must be part of the definition as well. There are already learning theories, like constructivism and androgagy, supporting the importance of student involvement in learning development.

There are potential challenges in the approach but remember student-centered does not mean student-isolated. While teachers guide students in the learning process to connect their goals to the lesson and build on their existing knowledge, students still have the autonomy to make their own path. That is vital to increase a lesson or training's effectiveness. As researcher Joel Voss said, "The bottom line is, if you're not the one who's controlling your learning, you're not going to learn as well" (Davis, 2018).

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