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What is student-centredness and is it enough?

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Abstract

Student-centredness is a central concept in the literature and practice associated with the first year in higher education. The location of the concept is so commonplace that it is often used without definition or clarification. Yet in recent years, student-centredness has been questioned on a number of levels including its implications for the role of the teacher, the student as consumer metaphor and the role of others in the teaching/learning partnership. This paper reviews pertinent literature on student-centredness and its place in the first year in higher education and presents an argument to refocus emphasis away from students alone back to their learning.

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Introduction

Student-centred learning and other student-centred practices have been growing in influence in the first year experience literature for number of years. Nelson, Clarke, Kift and Creagh (2011) report that between 2004-2007 previous work was “overshadowed by a dominant second generation literature that reflected a student-centred philosophy” (p. vi). While in a recent overview from the United Kingdom, it was stated that “academic programmes and high-quality student-centred learning and teaching must be a primary focus for effective student retention and success” (Thomas, 2012, p. 6).

Student-centredness has been a significant strategy for the first year in higher education as both academic and professional staff strive to support and advance student learning in the challenging transition years. As a result, student-centredness is currently the reigning paradigm of transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) and is routinely used by first year practitioners and researchers assuming that all readers have a shared understanding of its meaning. It is now an approach that is so commonplace that few have questioned its underpinning theory or meaning, its continuing relevance or its impact on practice. However, student-centredness and student-centred learning are diversely defined and interpreted. Its colloquial interpretations may not be enough to clearly articulate what programs aim to achieve and may lead to practices or student expectations that are counter to effective learning.

This paper presents an overview of interpretations of student-centredness and student-centred learning from the

perspective of the first year in higher education. It argues that there is much more to student-centredness than is usually perceived and that this can present difficulties when programs aim to support and advance student learning.

What is student-centredness?

The concept of student-centredness and its partner learner-centredness have been around for over two hundred and fifty years. Smith (2010, p. 30) in a review of key thinkers in education argues that the work of French and Swiss philosophers Rousseau (1712-1778) and Pestalozzi (1746-1827) are early examples of student-centredness. Both advocated that the student (in their case the child) rather than content should be at the centre of education and promoted children being actively involved. Dewey (1859-1952) has also been linked with this view, but his position is thought to be somewhat more controversial (Westbrook, 1993, p. 3). Various authors have defined student-centredness since these very early concepts (e.g. Brandes & Ginnis, 1986; Gibbs, 1995; Rogers, 1983; Tuckman, 1969) but this paper does not aim to present a full historical map of the concept's development.

Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) have synthesised these many definitions to present seven tenets upon which student-centredness is founded. These tenets included:

- the reliance on active rather than passive learning;
- an emphasis on deep learning and understanding;
- increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student;

- an increased sense of autonomy in the learner;
- an interdependence between teacher and learner;
- mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship; and
- a reflexive approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both teacher and learner. (p. 322)

These tenets are a first step in understanding the complexity of the student-centred construct. In a similar review of definitions, O'Neill and McMahon (2005) have repeated the above tenets (p. 28) and built on these and other work to claim that three dimensions can be used to describe student-centredness (p. 29). The first dimension is associated with students' choice. An example of this is seen in Burnard's (1999) description which states that "students might not only choose what to study, but how and why that topic might be an interesting one to study" (p. 244). The second dimension incorporates the active nature of student learning exemplified by Gibbs' (1995) description, in which he asks all to "emphasise learner activity rather than passivity" (p. 1). The final dimension revolves around the power relations between students and teachers displayed in Cannon and Newble's (2000) description which says student-centredness "has student responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to a strong emphasis on teacher control and coverage of academic content in much conventional didactic teaching" (p. 16).

Paris and Combs (2006) claim that this proliferation of definitions is "staggering and dangerous" as many are "idiosyncratic and incompatible" (p. 572). They cite six examples of the diverse meanings that the

student-centred concept has been linked with:

- a student-as-consumer perspective leading to flexible scheduling and delivery of services in community colleges, vocational and continuing education;
- instruction that is individualised through the use of interactive, computer delivered materials;
- a state-wide standards-based, multi-measure assessment system;
- teaching approaches described in opposition to those that are content focused;
- interactive learning experiences as opposed to individual student work; and
- teaching that simultaneously incorporates student voice and choice and focuses on meeting content standards. (p. 572)

A snapshot of student-centredness from the 2012 First Year in Higher Education Conference further reinforces the diversity of interpretations. Although no definitions are included, the term has been used in reference to peer mentoring as a just-in-time, just-for-me approach to meet student needs (Townsend, Schoo & Dickson-Swift, 2012), inter-professional learning as a teaching method to develop active learning (Davis & Jones, 2012) and as a way of engaging students online through social media to again meet student needs (Jenkins, Lyons, Bridgstock & Carr, 2012). Mostly these interpretations and those used elsewhere in the first year literature appear to incorporate components of accepted definitions, but do not clearly state their purpose. Principally,

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interpretations appear to view student-centredness as a way to look through the students' eyes and to put students' needs above other needs such as content or administrative. An example of this interpretation is voiced by Parker (2012) when he writes that in the future "the university will be fundamentally organised around student-centred principles. Students will want education à la carte: education when they want it, how they want it, where they want it" (para 5).

What is the concern about student-centredness?

The drive to ensure the first year experience is centred on the student has shifted thinking and practice in the first year of study so that by 2010 first year students' experiences have enhanced significantly (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). However, since the beginning of 21st century, there has been growing body of literature in which the use of student-centredness has been questioned. In 2004, two prominent higher education researchers raised concerns about the focus on the student rather than on their learning or the wider learning environment. Boud (2006) reflected that

the discursive strategy of focussing attention on learners was by no means an unreasonable move given their previous neglect. However, an excess of attention to this dimension can draw attention away from many other potentially important concerns such as the total learning environment, emotional and cultural demands on students, or indeed, what we are seeking to produce. (p. 29)

While Anderson (2004) from the perspective of online learning believed that

for too long we have built education on models focused on teachers and institutional need. Reversing the priority to an exclusive focus on learners may have equally negative effects. Formal learning is a partnership, negotiated between and among learners and teachers. Focusing on only one side of the partnership obscures necessary input from others. (p. 240)

In teaching and learning situations, student-centredness is often juxtaposed with teacher-centredness, as if practices could only be one or the other. Teacher-centredness and its perceived close companion—the didactic lecture—are often judged to be lesser than student-centred approaches in which teachers have the role of facilitator (Cousin, 2010). However, the term facilitator can undervalue the role of the teacher, and Carlile and Jordan (2009) say that "the teacher is not just a 'facilitator of learning,' she is more like an orchestral conductor who knows both the nature of the music and the styles and abilities of the performers" (p. 8).

McWilliam (2009) is also concerned about the facilitator only role and writes that facilitating or guiding "can become an excuse for passivity on the part of the teacher" (p. 287). This presumed disempowerment of teachers and what they bring to the learning experience has prompted Cousin (2008) to ask: "Is it time to swing the pendulum back to teachers, not as lone sages on the stage but to strongly position them with their students and educational researchers/developers as partners in an inquiry into disciplinary concerns?" (p. 268).

Students also are not completely convinced about the benefits of a student-centred approach. In one study, students raised

concern about “educators achieving a balance between an approach that was too teacher-driven on the one hand and overly student-centred on the other. They expressed anxiety about an approach that lacked structure, guidance and support in the name of being student-centred” (Lea et al., 2003, p. 331). In another study, students were reported as believing that “student- and teacher-centeredness seem to be mutually reinforcing features of high quality education” (Elen, Clarebout, Le’onard & Lowyck, 2007, p. 105).

In reality, just like all teachers at university, teachers of first year are much more than facilitators of learning. Hattie (2009) reports that the quality of teachers and their teaching contribute significantly to students’ learning success. He writes that teaching must be explicitly visible and describes “teachers as activators, deliberate change agents, and as directors of learning” (p. 25). Similarly Goodyear (2005) and Ellis and Goodyear (2010) view teachers in online, technology-enhanced environments as active designers of architectures for learning which include experiences, habitats, strategies and tactics. A view of student-centredness that delegates teachers to the role of facilitators does not depict their actual roles. Cousin (2010) and the author have experienced staff development sessions with university teachers who strongly object to being relegated to the role of facilitator of learning. These teachers believe that this undervalues their discipline knowledge and that a “facilitator” of learning is passive and does not reflect the reality of teaching and learning at university.

Today, first year teaching is different from the types of university teaching apparent when student-centredness first became popular. The teacher is only one of many

professionals who are involved in enhancing student learning in the first year. Students meet and learn along with researchers in undergraduate research projects, with community members in work integrated learning programs, with other professional and academic staff in embedded student academic and library skills programs, with fellow students in peer assisted learning strategies and with career development staff. No longer is learning a partnership between only the student and the teacher, there is often quite a crowd.

As ideas about placing students at the centre of teaching, and indeed all practices undertaken in the first year of university, have grown, practitioners have increasingly focussed on the learning and non-learning needs of students. Certainly, the definitions presented by Black (2007) and McCombs (2000) ask us to focus on individual learners, “their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs” coupled with learning (p.186). There is a growing perception that student-centeredness revolves around meeting students’ needs.

This focus on meeting students’ needs has been linked with a growing move to consider students as customers or clients to be satisfied. Schwartzman (1995) has questioned the cost of that metaphor. He claims that although it has some advantages—especially if used by administrators—when used in teaching and learning contexts, it compromises the goals of education, defines “customers” too narrowly, confuses the short-term satisfaction with long-term learning and insufficiently accounts for the students-teacher interaction. In support of this concern, Finney and Finney (2010) and

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Finney, Finney and Spake (2010), in US-based studies of students' perceptions of themselves as customers and their "entitlements," found that students who viewed themselves as customers were more likely to hold attitudes and to engage in behaviours that were not conducive to success. Similarly, Carlile and Jordan (2009) is UK-based work proposed that while students demand speed and convenience, evidence suggests that "deep knowledge can only be acquired over a long time with much inconvenient work" (p. 90.7¹). Clearly, satisfying students' needs is not a simple act of responding, and requires significant professional judgment on the part of the teacher and supporting staff to ensure that meaningful student learning does occur and provide students with opportunities to acquire the necessary skills to progress.

Conclusions

The first year of university study is a challenging time for students and for the staff who teach and support them. In Australia, the first year is characterised by high levels of diversity across student populations, making the challenges even greater. This is especially the case in regional universities where universities in the Regional Universities Network (RUN) each report enrolling over 20% of students from low SES backgrounds (My University Website, 2013) and together enrol 15 per cent of Indigenous students, 32 per cent of students in enabling courses and 36% of all distance education students (RUN, 2013, para. 7). Many of these students are also first in the family to study at university. Further, regional and other universities have raised concerns about the academic preparedness of first year students. For

example mathematical preparedness is an issue for science- and engineering-based courses (Rylands & Coady, 2009). When faced with such challenges, it is essential that students and their views continue to be considered, but using student-centred as a catch-all for a diverse range of practices may not be enough to support learning of diverse students. This paper has presented an argument not against the spirit of student-centred but for a reconsideration and clarification of the term and its use. The question is what form should this clarification take?

Today the changing nature of students' first year experiences means that many are involved in student-centred learning and when this is accompanied by the growth of a consumer-focused culture, this reinforces the need for all in the first year of university to be clear on the nature of effective learning. Ellis and Goodyear (2010, p. 25) describe six principles that characterise effective student learning at university:

Learning is individual as each learner constructs their own knowledge in a unique way, using past experiences and existing knowledge to make sense of new information. This of course does not mean that learning is always an isolated process; what one can achieve with others is often richer than what one can do alone. Such learning can take place in formal, non-formal and informal situations.

Learning is challenging as each learner steps into an unknown space of new knowledge, concepts or skills. This space can be unstable, uncomfortable or even stressful as the learner oscillates between old and emergent understandings (Cousin, 2008, p. 4). Challenge is essential for

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learning, but strategies need to be put in place so as not to overwhelm.

Learning is active as each learner has to undertake mental effort to understand a new task or concept. It takes some effort to learn.

Learning is self-regulated as each learner needs to be aware of what they know, what they do not know and have the ability to take action based on this awareness. Effective learners will have knowledge of how they learn, and are able to use that knowledge to monitor and adjust their approach. As such learning can last beyond the university experience.

Learning is situated as learners will find it difficult to transfer what is learned in one context to another. Yet learning at university does require use of knowledge abstracted from specific contexts and the ability to work with different way of knowing.

Learning is goal-oriented as learners need explicit goals for learning to be effective. These goals may be set by the learner, by the teacher, through a community or through a process of negotiation.

Although these principles bear a strong resemblance to the tenets of Lea et al. (2003) discussed previously, the focus here is clearly learning rather than the learner. Learning is the *raison d'être* for universities so it is logical that thoughts of learning should explicitly dominate all of our practices for and with students. These principles help frame how practice should couple students with their learning to place learning not students alone at the centre. Thus learning-centredness would direct teaching, curricula and learning support

towards the complete learning process, acknowledging the attributes and active roles of learners alongside those of teachers, learning support staff, researchers and the community.

In practice, this would mean that first year teaching and practices that followed a learning-centred approach would acknowledge:

- the attributes that students bring to learning including diverse prior knowledge, diverse approaches to learning and diverse learning needs;
- the active role and responsibilities of the learner;
- the significant role and responsibilities of the teacher (and/or learning support staff) as the designer and/or activator of learning; and
- the role of researchers, communities and disciplines in shaping and activating learning.

The term student-centred is so entrenched in the first year in higher education that it is unlikely that its use will stop. Yet this paper shows that it has been diversely used and interpreted, and calls for all practitioners to use the term with care, defining what in fact their practice actually believes about student learning, teaching and support in action.

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