

Chapter 87

Learner–Centered Pedagogies: A Critical Review of the Use and Implications for Learner– Centered Pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a critical review of conventional and not so conventional Student-Centered Learning (SCL) pedagogies. Additionally, in the African context, educational institutions have been caught up in a theoretical approach to teaching and learning, characterized by a desire to pass examinations. Consequently, this approach leads to surface learning as opposed to deep learning. Hence, teaching and learning outcomes lack quality and definitely fails to meet and promote skills required by the fast changing modern and postmodern global world. To address this need, this chapter examines the following: Overview of SCL pedagogies; Conventional and not so Conventional SCL pedagogies; Implications for SCL pedagogies to learners, instructors, curriculum, and assessment. Finally, this chapter examines the misconceptions and advantages of adopting SCL in the light of learners and instructors.

INTRODUCTION

Informed by Confucius classical adages, “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand” (Confucius, 551-479 BC/2013), to learn without thinking [and doing] is labour in vain. As pointed out by O’Neill and McMahon (2005), to think without learning is desolation to the 21st century rationale for Student Centered Learning (SCL). Hence, it is critically important to challenge, inform, and acquaint the 21st century Teacher Education Programs (TEPs), instructors and learners to appreciate and adopt SCL pedagogies for effective teaching and learning, and most importantly, to nurture lifelong learners who are reflective, independent, active, creative and emotionally engaged in the teaching/learning process and later in the work place.

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Many terms and phrases have been used to explain SCL also sometimes referred to as child-centered learning (CCL). However, for the purposes of this paper, and key audience – learners, teacher, and teacher education programs, the term SCL will be used. Additionally, since the focus of the handbook is teacher education and professional development, the concepts *instructor* and *teacher* are used in this paper to denote educators trained in pedagogy required to teach at the level of Teacher Education programs and educators trained to teach at the basic education level respectively. Abdullah, Osman, Shamsuddin, Yusoff and Ismail (2012) define student-centered learning pedagogy “as putting students first and focusing on the students’ needs, abilities, interests and learning styles, with the teacher [instructor] as a facilitator of learning” (p. 24). Student-Centered Learning has also been referred to as flexible learning, experiential learning and self-directed learning (Burnard, 1999; Taylor, 2000 as cited in O’Neill & McMahan, 2005.). There is no single widely agreed definition of SCL.

However, scholars and proponents of SCL approaches to teaching/learning concur that SCL is based on the philosophy that the student is at the heart of the learning process, that is, the student is the focal point of the process (Di Napoli, 2010; Education International, 2010; Harris, Spina, Ehrich & Smeed, 2013; Student Centered Learning, SCL, 2010). As the authors further contend, the role of the instructor remains indispensable especially at the level of addressing individual learner’s needs.

In this paper, I adopt Collins and O’Brien’s (2003) understanding of SCL as I perceive it as more operational. In their text, Dictionary of Education, Collins and O’Brien operationalized SCL as:

An instructional approach in which students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. This learning model places the student [learner] in the centre of the learning process. The instructor provides students with [varied] opportunities to learn independently and from one another and coaches them in the skills they need to do so effectively. The SCL approach includes such techniques as substituting active learning experiences for lectures, assigning open ended problems, and problems requiring critical or creative thinking that cannot be solved by following text examples, involving students in simulations and role plays, and using self paced and/or cooperative (team-based) learning. Properly implemented SCL can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught (p. 343).

Student Centered learning can also be understood from its attributes which according to Iowa Core (n.d) are: “Construction of learning, collaborative learning, metacognition, educator/student partnerships, and authentic assessment” (p.2). In the light of SCL, by reflecting on their experiences, learners are better able to construct their own understanding of their world. This leads to deep learning as opposed to surface learning (O’Neill & McMahan, 2005).

Collaborative learning as a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning, respecting abilities and contributions of their peers has been found to make learning exciting and consequently improve learning outcomes. This was observed by Vygostky (1978) who asserted that learning is a social activity and therefore influences brain development. Vygostky further stressed that what learners can do with the assistance of others influences their brain development positively. As I have argued in this paper, SCL is highly collaborative in nature and practice.

Meta-cognition is the ability to reflect on ones current level of understanding, be able to decide whether it is adequate, and seek out and develop new approaches to understanding (National Research Council, 2000 as cited by Iowa Core, n.d). Hence, learners working together are better able to not only

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