Chapter 40
Learner–Centered Course Design

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ABSTRACT

A learner-centered instructional design is far more complex than providing riveting discussions or choices within the syllabus. A learner-centered focus demands a developmental understanding of how students transform into adults capable of making individual choices, managing multi-dimensional relationships and creating self-awareness to sustain growth over time. This chapter will address transformation (Mezirow, 2000), learner-centered pedagogy (Weimer, 2002), the demands of the millennial student, and the use of significant learning experiences (Fink, 2003) which incorporates both teaching and learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons to create a learner-centered classroom environment. One is to engage learners more fully in the content. The second is to develop sophisticated and independent learners. The third is to create a community of practice, a safe environment for newbies to learn the nuances of what we as faculty love about our individual disciplines; and finally creating significant learn-

ing experiences to integrate content into a larger learning framework.

What defines an engaged learner in academia has change dramatically over the last 20 years. Students have many choices about what school to attend, what courses to choose and also how to engage in each course. The interesting dynamic is that students want each instructor to provide specific direction and freedom concurrently. Faculty and institutions are beginning to meet those demands on a larger scale through providing options such as choice in assignments, deadlines and topics of study. Institutions are offering courses in multiple

formats such as face-to-face, hybrid or entirely online. These options then create a challenge to more traditional teachers and institutions. Weimer (2002) captures the pedagogical shift when she states "we have stopped assuming that learning is the automatic, inevitable outcome of teaching" (p. 49). This chapter will address ideas of how to systematically shift towards a learner-centered course without losing the richness of content. One step is to understand the developmental process that college students go through as they simultaneously become adults.

Developing sophisticated and independent learners is a pedagogical challenge for faculty. Many factors share importance with the traditional emphasis on content. One issue is sharing power and space during a course. For example, a faculty member may choose to create the assignments, a skeleton of required readings but allow students to determine additional readings and deadlines. Sharing power can range from the meaningless choices to the co-creation of a course experience. The time required to scaffold students' experiences through a shared process of making informed and important decisions in a course is a salient element of learner-centered instruction. In terms of independence, the range of learning outcomes must vary because not all students are mature enough to make strong choices. Thus a developmental framework is necessary for faculty to consider when creating a scope and sequence for a course that is learner-centered.

Finally, the enduring purpose in creating independent, critically aware students is summed up by Brookfield (1995), "We teach to change the world. The hope that undergirds our efforts to help students learn is that doing this will help them act toward each other, and toward their environment, with compassion, understanding, and fairness" (p. 1). A monumental task by any measure, how faculty have the privilege to create rather than manufacture democratically minded citizens,

successful students and dynamic institutions one assignment at a time.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework presented here is a culmination of multiple publications by Dr. Karen Swanson (author) and Dr. Mary Kayler over the last seven years. We have been greatly influenced by Dr. Marcia Baxter Magolda in self-authorship, Dr. Steven Brookfield in critical reflection, Dr. Maryellen Wiemer in learner-centered theory and Dr. Kathleen McKinney in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

A broad framework is necessary when faculty consider shifting to a learner-centered course design. Many times the motivation to restructure a course is to respond to student requests for autonomy, to increase engagement or to invigorate a traditional teaching style. However, many times faculty become quickly disillusioned if not prepared for the bigger picture of adult learning and how to design a learner-centered activity or syllabus. While both faculty and students begin with the best of intentions, learner-centered teaching and the required independent learning is at first a difficult dance to coordinate. Some of the common issues include student resistance, the time required for faculty to redesign content and instructional plans, the shift from exclusively summative assessment towards the inclusion of formative assessment.

The theoretical framework will begin with adult development for the purpose of providing faculty with an understanding that students are rarely lazy and/or unmotivated. If students are viewed from a development perspective, the instructional goal is to meet them where they are at and help them become self-directed for progress

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