

Mike Jaques

PGCE Year 1

“Student Centred Learning”

Tutor: Gordon Duffy-McGhie

Middlesbrough College

Submitted 26 February 2004

How can the opportunities for student learning be enhanced?

Student Centred learning in New Media.

Throughout both Further and Higher Education there is developing a strong shift in 'emphasis from Teacher Centred to Learner-Centred Learning' (Dixon and Woodhouse, 1996, p.17).

Teachers and lecturers are regularly being encouraged to adopt a Constructivist or Student-Centred Learning approach, and many influential reports have covered the subject in great detail. However, as with many teaching theories, the actual application of a model can prove difficult. This is particularly true in New Media related subjects that require a large amount of technical understanding and a systematic approach to delivery.

In order to look at the implications of Student-Centred Learning in New Media related subjects we must first address "What is Student Centred Learning?" The question can best be answered by comparing the traditional Teacher Centred model and the Student-Centred Learning model.

Teacher Centred	Student Centred
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers serve as the centre of epistemological knowledge, directing the learning process and controlling student's access to information. • Students viewed as 'empty' vessels and learning is viewed as an additive process. • Instruction is geared for the 'average' student and everyone is forced to progress at the same rate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backed by research that students are not empty vessels. They come with their own perceptual frameworks (Erikson, 1984). • Students learn in different ways (Briggs-Myers, 1980; Kolb, 1984). • Learning is an active dynamic process in which connections are constantly changing and their structure is continually reformatted (Cross, 1991). • Students construct their own meaning by talking, listening, writing, reading, and reflecting on content, ideas, issues and concerns (Meyers and Jones, 1993)

(University of Bath, n.d)

Gibbs (1992, p.23) offers a useful definition of student centred learning. He states that Student-Centred Learning 'gives students greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study'. A more detailed definition is provided by Rogers (2002). He states that

‘Student-Centred learning puts more responsibility on the learners for their own learning. It involves students in more decision-making processes, and they learn by doing, rather than just by listening and performing meaningless tasks which are often not in context and therefore ‘unreal’ to them. Because learning becomes more active (rather than passively listening to the teacher), it becomes more memorable: because it is personalised, and relevant to the students’ own lives and experiences, it brings language ‘alive’, and makes it relevant to the real world.’

Much research has been carried out in to the subject and it is difficult to argue with the findings. Student-Centred Learning can be an extremely effective teaching model. In the right environment and with good planning and preparation there is strong evidence to suggest that learners not only retain more knowledge but also greatly benefit from the process itself.

However in some circumstances it may be difficult to apply all aspects of Student-Centred Learning. New Media provides an example of the problems that can be encountered.

“Computer-based learning and distance learning has until relatively recently, and still is in some quarters, been based on an instructional design model which is fundamentally objectivist in its view of learning. Such a view means that the learning is delivered as a prescriptive teacher-centred self-contained package to meet assumed learner needs”.
(University of Bath, n.d).

Although it may be easy to argue that Computer-based teaching methods are outdated, there are many reasons why an instructional or Teacher-Centred model was adopted. The most compelling reason is that many computer based subjects are very complex. This is

particularly true within New Media where students are being taught industry standard software that was developed for web and design professionals. Due to the complexity it is not always effective to allow each student 'greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study' (Gibbs. 1992. p.23). The lecturer's knowledge of the subject area allows for them to plan the delivery in a systematic form that builds knowledge and encourages progression. Simply allowing the students to 'dip' into the subject as they see fit would result in very little 'Application', 'Analysis', 'Synthesis' or 'Evaluation' (Bloom, 1956) being achieved by the student. An analogy would be if we put a student in a car and let them try to work out how to drive. They may play with the gears, they may press the pedals, they may even turn the ignition, but it is unlikely that they will successfully manage to teach themselves to drive. A Student requires not only a 'Knowledge' of the techniques used but also the development of each Cognitive level up to and including high level 'Synthesis' if they are to successfully 'create, design, develop, organize, plan', and 'set up' an effective web site, animation or image.

Due to the problems of adopting every principle of the Student-Centred Learning model some lecturers may use this as an excuse to persist with the outdated didactic model. Rather they could try to adopt some of the basic principles and move towards a more Constructivist approach. As Madeleine Murtagh (Murtagh, 1999) states in her article 'Student responses to student-centred learning', Student-Centred Learning 'seemed to provide the possibility of achieving two particular teaching outcomes. One, a better learning experience for the students who enrolled in my topic, and two, the possibility of achieving my aims to enable students to think critically'. Murtagh goes on to say that when she adopted a Student-Centred approach the 'Students were vocal in their resistance'. Murtagh used this finding as the starting point for an action research project on 'Why do students resist student-centred learning strategies?' The problems she discovered seemed to focus primarily on Group work and Peer and Self Assessment. However the overriding feeling throughout her research was that when using Student-Centred Learning 'the students found the learning process a rewarding one'. Some of the benefits identified by Murtagh through focus groups were;

- 'There's more interaction',
- 'I learnt more doing the group work',
- 'Encouraged confidence',
- 'It takes the pressure off',

A student within a focus group was asked by the facilitator 'So if you had the choice between a lecture, a tutorial session whereby you did a reading you turned up you discuss the reading and you went away or you had a tutorial ...where ...you had the kinds of processes that you've had, what would you choose? To which the student replied 'The latter. Definitely. Because I've been there, done that with the first one. Boring. You don't learn a lot' (Murtagh, 1999).

Further supporting evidence for a Student-Centred Learning approach is provided by a range of authors. Lander et al (1995) found that 'People learn best by doing things, not by being passive recipients'. Other studies 'have consistently found that higher order thinking skills are not acquired through didactic approaches, but rather through learner's active involvement with information.' (Collins, Brown and Newman, 1989; Resnick 1987). Whilst a University of Bath paper states 'The basic model of communication is one way from teacher to student and the focus is recall and application of knowledge. An alternative 'cognitive' model would help the learner actively participate in the learning environment by providing them with a variety of contexts and different views.' (University of Bath, n.d).

Undoubtedly lecturers in all subjects could benefit though adopting a Student-Centred Learning approach, and in particular New Media lecturers could improve the Student learning experience through incorporating some of its simple principles whilst also considering how they can develop the deep learning that is necessary.

The table below was produced by The University of Bath and 'compares instructional variables associated with teacher and student-centred approaches to teaching and learning. It provides a useful guide to the creation or evaluation of student-centred learning environments.' (University of Bath, n.d).

Instructional Variable	Instructional Approach	
	Teacher-Centred	Student-Centred
Learning Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discipline-specific verbal information. • Lower order thinking skills, e.g. recall, identify, define. • Memorisation of abstract and isolated facts, figures and formulas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdisciplinary information and knowledge. • Higher order thinking skills, e.g. problem-solving. • Information processing skills, e.g. access, organise, interpret, communicate information.
Goals and Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher prescribes learning goals and objectives based on prior experiences, past practices, and state and/or locally mandated standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students work with teachers to select learning goals and objectives based on authentic problems and students' prior knowledge, interests and experience.
Instructional Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional strategy prescribed by teacher. • Group-paced, designed for 'average' student. • Information organised and presented primarily by teacher, e.g. lectures, with some supplemental reading assignments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher works with students to determine learning strategy. • Self-paced, designed to meet needs of individual student. • Student given direct access to multiple sources of information, e.g. books, online databases, community members.
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment used to sort students. • Paper and pencil exams used to assess students acquisition of information. • Teacher sets performance criteria for students. • Students left to find out what teacher wants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment is integral part of learning. • Performance based, used to assess students ability to apply knowledge. • Students work with teachers to define performance criteria. • Students develop self-assessment and peer assessment skills.
Teacher's Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher organises and presents information to groups of students. • Teachers act as gatekeeper of knowledge, controlling students' access to information. • Teacher directs learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher provides multiple means of accessing information. • Teacher acts as facilitator, helps students access and process information. • Teacher facilitates learning.
Student's Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students expect teachers to teach them what's required to pass the test. • Passive recipients of information. • Reconstructs knowledge and information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students take responsibility for learning. • Active knowledge seekers. • Construct knowledge and meaning.
Learning Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students sit in rows. • Information presented via lectures, books and films. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students work at stations with access to multiple resources. • Students work individually at times but also need to collaborate in small groups.

Those variables in bold have been highlighted to signify particular relevance to New Media. As we have discussed, in order to successfully deliver New Media related courses it is important that a Student-Centred Learning approach is adopted. However doing so can prove difficult. But simple changes could make decisive differences to the Students' learning. An example of this would be to simply change the seating within the class room. As we can see from the above table the traditional learning environment of students sitting in rows does not encourage Student-Centred Learning. Instead the class could be reorganised as stations with access to multiple resources. Furthermore lecturers could move away from information presented via lectures, books and films, and use more task based exercises and group work. An additional benefit of both individual and group tasks is that they can effectively provide for differentiation. It is also worth noting that due to the complex nature of the subjects demonstrations may still be used to explain techniques and processes. Interactive Whiteboards now allow complex techniques to be broken down into bite size chunks that the students can easily digest.

An important element of Student-Centred Learning is assessment. Assessment could be used as an integral part of learning. This may mean that students are taught a series of techniques and are then required to combine what they have learnt to create an original piece of work. Rather than using assessment to simply check the students' ability to recall, identify, and define, the assessment could ascertain the student's ability for Synthesis and Higher-order thinking skills that are a vital for anyone wishing to work within the creative industries. The lecturer could also consider revising their role. Rather than an instructor they could act as a facilitator. However, as discussed previously, it may not be advisable to allow the students to direct their own learning at all times. Rather the lecturer could seek to provide multiple means of accessing the same information, using handouts, web links, demonstration, group work, and tasks. It may be that variety becomes as important as delivery.

A key part of the teaching process could also seek to make the teaching relevant to the students. Assignments could be used to create images, web sites and animations to a brief based on authentic problems and students' prior knowledge, interests and experience.

Rather than students expecting the lecturer to teach them what's required to pass the test they may take responsibility for learning and become active knowledge seekers.

To conclude Student-Centred Learning could be used by many New Media Lecturers to improve the student learning experience. Although the practicalities of implementing the model may appear difficult the actual application of the model will undoubtedly prove beneficial. As Sparrow states 'It is feasible to allow student choice of time and place but harder to provide student choice in content and to acknowledge and use student strengths and weaknesses. It is, however, a worthwhile direction to explore.' (Sparrow, 2000).

Reference List

Dixon and Woolhouse. 1996, *The Relationship Between Teachers' and Learners' Individual Teaching/Learning Styles* quoted in New College Durham. 2001, *Enhancing Learning*. p.15.

Gibbs, G. (1992). *Assessing more students*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

Sparrow, L., Sparrow, H. and Swan, P. (2000). *Student centred learning: Is it possible?* In A. Herrmann and M.M. Kulski (Eds), *Flexible Futures in Tertiary Teaching*. Proceedings of the 9th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, 2-4 February 2000. Perth: Curtin University of Technology. <http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2000/sparrow.html>

Rogers, G. (2002). *Student Centred Learning – A Practical Guide For Teachers*. (online) June 2002, www.britishcouncil.or.th/en/partnerships/download-SCL%20for%20Thai%20TESOL%20paper.doc [Accessed 6 Nov. 2004]

University of Bath, (n.d). <http://www.bath.ac.uk/e-learning/objectivist.htm> [Accessed 8 Nov. 2004]

Murtagh, M (1999). *Student responses to student-centred learning*. Speech delivered at HERDSA Annual International Conference, Melbourne, 12-15 July 1999. (online) www.herdsa.org.au/branches/vic/Cornerstones/pdf/Murtagh.PDF [Accessed 8 Nov. 2004]

Bloom, B. (1956) *Bloom's Taxonomy*. (online) <http://www.officeport.com/edu/blooms.htm> [Accessed 13 Nov. 2004]

Lander et al, (1995) cited in Denis Lander, *Online Teaching: Educational Considerations*, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (online) <http://homepages.eu.rmit.edu.au/resdl/teaching3.html> [Accessed 8 Nov. 2004]

Collins, Brown and Newman, 1989; Resnick 1987 in Harper, B and Hedberg J, *Creating Motivating Interactive Learning Environments: a Constructivist View*, ASCILITE 97 Conference Paper, University of Curtin 1997 (online) <http://www.curtin.edu.au/conference/ascilite97/papers/Harper/Harper.html> [Accessed 13 Nov. 2004].