

General Insights of the Implementation of the Learner Centered Teaching

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Abstract

The transformation from teacher centered to learner centered teaching has been one of the most important contemporary trends in the provision of education. Studies in various national and cultural contexts have been reporting several issues addressing about this shift. The issues include how the transformation is promoted, implemented, as well as challenges in the course. This article discusses general insights of the implementation of the learner centered teaching. It describes conceptualization of the learner centered teaching. It also explains the processes of promoting and implementing the learner centered teaching. The article ends by summarizing conclusions made about the implementation of the learner centered teaching.

Keywords: learner centered teaching, teacher centered, implementation, performance.

Conceptualization of the learner centered teaching

The idea of the learner centered teaching derives from the works of several scholars. The earliest scholar to have a thoughtful and direct effect on the learner centered teaching was the Greek philosopher Socrates. In his work, Socrates engaged in the learner centered education. The scholar emphasized students questioning and thinking. The intellectual believed students to gain a deeper understanding through dialogue. Afterward, other scholars made development at different times regarding the learner centered teaching. These scholars include European educators like Pestalozzi, Hegel, Herbart, and Froebel. They designed experience based and learner centered curricula. The most prominent scholars in the 20th century are the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, the Russian sociologist Lev Vygotsky and the American philosopher John Dewey. They devised the learner centered teaching from the constructivist approach (Henson, 2003).

In reality, there is an existence of the relationship between constructivist approach and learner centered teaching. This approach enables students play an active role in their learning. It is in this manner the constructivist approach is often called the learner centered teaching. This view is to perceive that the main contribution of this approach has been directed to the learner centered teaching. Teachers who are applying this approach usually shift the focus of practices from teachers to students. They put more effort on the interest of students and produce an environment whereby the students' role is central. The emphasis is on how students learn and understand the subject matter. Educators supported the reform towards the learner centered teaching as it enhanced students' learning.

Basically, scholars have been defining learner centered teaching according to their own point of view. Brackenbury (2012) defines learner centered teaching as 'a collection of instructional practices that shift the emphasis of courses from the instructors' goals and methods of delivery to the knowledge and skills that the students develop' (p.12). In the same perspective, Blumberg (2008) added that this learning model shifts the role of teachers from givers of information to facilitators of students' learning. Teachers are not considered as experts who know everything, but they guide students learning the subject matter by engaging them in various practices. Also, Collins and O'Brien (2003) defines learner centered teaching as an instructional approach in which students influence the content, the activities, the materials, and the pace of the learning. This learning model places the student (learner) in the center of the learning process (p.339).

In another perspective, the learner centered teaching is considered to be a kind of learning that focuses on students' needs and interests. To accomplish that students are allowed to have some control in various educational decisions. They discuss matters related to classroom practices and how they should be carried out successfully. Students are always given high priority to the education systems. In line to this, Rogers (1983) summarizes the learner centered teaching as the teaching that focuses on the interest of students and acknowledges, appreciates, respects their voice as central to the learning experiences. This process improves students' engagement, motivation, commitment, confidence to succeed, and perception of control over learning. Generally, it leads to further learning and higher achievement in school (Alexander & Murphy, 2000).

Promoting the learner centered teaching

The educational systems in the current days emphasize implementation of the learner centered teaching in various national and cultural contexts. This view has attributed to the fact that the learning model has shown to be more effective for improving learning, performance, and in general the quality of education. In line to the preceding, programs initiated in different countries seem to support what educators in the international

educational forums and organizations intended. The programs encompass World Education Forums held in Jomtien-Thailand (Inter-agency Commission, 1990) and another one in Dakar-Senegal (UNESCO, 2000), together with Millennium Development Goals and international organizations. All these programs instructed nations to promote the learner centered teaching (Adams & Sargent, 2012; Ginsburg, 2009; Schweisfurth, 2013). On the same token, Blumberg (2008) found strong evidence of the implementation of the learner centered teaching instead of teacher centered teaching. Scholars in education forums support the learner centered teaching because it assures effective teaching and learning, and it enables students in acquiring essential knowledge and skills (Inter-agency Commission, 1990). Similarly, Wenglinsky (2001) wanted schools to be effective by implementing a policy that supports active teaching as opposed to passive teaching. Active teaching is known mainly for creating an environment that engages students in learning the subject matter more successfully.

Moreover, the learner centered teaching has been considered as a good strategy that addresses the problem of learning and poor performance in various national and cultural contexts. The model is believed to support improvement in students' performance. Froyd and Simpson (2008) pointed out papers that produced results from various studies and confirmed positive influence of the learner centered teaching on academic performance, attitudes toward learning, and persistence in educational programs. Similarly, Collins and O'Brien (2003) viewed that properly implemented learner centered teaching can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes toward the subject being taught (p.339).

The foregoing stated attributes are perceived to enhance students' performance in the examinations. They could be considered among the aspects used for improving the quality of education. This view supports appropriate conditions to achieve quality education. The conditions should focus on providing solution to the challenges hindering good provision of education. In this regard, Schweisfurth (2013) stated the measurements that need to be put into consideration. They include: enhancing the learning process by applying the learner centered teaching, making the content of education more relevant, emphasizing on creativity and developing talents found in the learner, and improving the school climate. Similarly, the Inter-agency Commission (1990) summarized systematic efforts to improve school quality. It involves measurements that are connected to school inputs, processes and outputs. Input refers to the qualities/characteristics of teachers and students that they bring with them to the classroom experience. Process focuses on the teacher and student behaviors/practices in the classroom plus other variables. Output refers to measures of student learning that has taken part from the normal teaching process (Huit, 1995).

Other scholars support the adoption and implementation of the learner centered teaching because it considers previous knowledge as crucial. The knowledge students possess determines what he/she could learn successfully in the next higher level. Thus to achieve effective teaching and learning teachers are advised to put more effort on examining students prior knowledge. Alexander and Murphy (2000) clarified further on the importance of knowledge base of students. The scholars opined that the prior knowledge of an individual student determines what new idea he/she attends, how he/she organizes and represents new information, how he/she filters new experiences and even what he/she determines to be important or relevant.

In addition, the learner centered teaching focuses on the learning outcomes something that is fundamental in educational provision. Learning outcomes comply with the ongoing educational reforms that put emphasis on outcome-based education. They assess what students have mastered and can demonstrate after undergoing the teaching and learning process. Education systems measure success by looking on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students gained and which they can be able to offer to achieve the intended educational outcomes (Sumra & Katabaro, 2014). This is to clarify that education system focuses on what a graduate does in the real life situation based on the education he/she claims to possess. It has been hoped that by adopting outcome-based education, the provision of education could produce graduates who can lead nations to their desired socioeconomic development.

In the process of promoting the learner centered teaching, there are efforts made in the provision of education. Various education systems have been modifying learning environment to support learner centered teaching. The systems aimed to ensure this model is given priority and is applied successfully in the classrooms. Other efforts were directed to improve all the components that influence education delivery. It includes aspects such as teacher training, teaching and learning practices, materials and resources, curriculum, and other school factors. The efforts ensure that the learner centered teaching is implemented smoothly.

The implementation of the learner centered teaching

Learner centered teaching has been conducted in various educational systems to facilitate the improvement of the provision of education. However, the trends of implementation in many national and cultural contexts unveil information that indicates the presence of challenges and obstacles. According to (Schweisfurth, 2011), the situation of the learner centered teaching across time, space, and lifespan indicated the stories of a failure. One of the main obstacles reported by educational experts was teachers have been transmitting information to students.

They still employ transmission methods in the classrooms (Adams & Sargent, 2012; Hardman et al., 2009; Sifuna & Sawamura, 2010; Vavrus, 2009).

The real teaching and learning process considers teachers to act as the primary source of information. They have given authority to prepare the subject matter and teach in the classroom without students asking or reflecting on what is taught. The information from teachers is considered as correct and final for the students to receive, copy, and gain knowledge. This observable fact was elaborated by a scholar cited in Rakhkochkine (2012) as the transfer of knowledge from a person who knows to those who do not know. Teachers are considered to know everything while students are empty vessels who cannot contribute anything in the classrooms. According to Vavrus (2009), this trend proved teaching approach remaining the same, and there is nothing that has been changed because teachers have been applying the authority that does not respect the knowledge of students (Tabulawa, 2013).

Many teachers seemed to believe on their old teaching model used to implement the lesson. This behavior caused resistance to the learner centered teaching. Teachers wanted to continue with transmission methods because it was found to work well for their students. It is the typical trait they experienced when instructed to shift from teacher to learner centered teaching. According to Toh (1994), teachers continued to use teacher centered approach because it is already familiar to them for many years. Similarly, the teaching of Science, Mathematics, and ICT in secondary education in some African countries showed a dominance of traditional styles of teaching in the classroom practices (SMICT study as cited in Cowen & Kazamias, 2009).

Another challenge was observed on the cultural aspects of the countries receiving and using programs of the learner centered teaching. The trend showed that implementation of this model was inappropriate in several learning contexts. It is because the programs from abroad accompany with the culture that might not work for the local culture. Hughes and Urasa (1997) observed the process of borrowing and receiving programs from overseas that it caused misunderstanding to teachers and students. Also, Sears and Hughes (2005) showed complexity in the transfer of knowledge and skills across international contexts and borders. Therefore, for the system of education to work well, the cultural assumptions of the main components in the classrooms need to be considered and modified to comply with the learner centered teaching.

The foregoing ideas are supported based on the connection that exists between teaching practices and culture. These aspects were reported to come together as pedagogy (Alexander, 2000). Therefore, cultural attributes are part and parcel of the learner centered teaching in the classroom. Several studies have been reporting similar and different trends of this paradigm. It is caused by the cultural attributes influencing classroom practices. In showing the importance of culture, Schweisfurth (2013) avowed that pedagogy incorporates cultural processes that develop attitudes, perceptions, understanding, and teaching practices. Also, OECD (2009) asserted that the effectiveness of classroom practice is domain-specific as well as goal-specific; it depends on the cultural context and professional traditions (p.97). Thus, to be successful in the process of improving learner centered teaching and performance, the cultural aspects are fundamental.

In addition, the studies reported weaknesses showed by teachers in employing the constructivist approach in classrooms. It is caused by teachers' failure in building a good understanding of the approach. It resulted in poor facilitation of the learner centered practices. Lamanauskas (2012) opined that the process of moving from constructivist philosophy to the characterization of constructivist practices caused a challenge. Widodo (2004) revealed that teachers did not understand the meaning of constructivist approach and others did not believe and accept it. The negative attitude made the application of this approach in the learner centered classrooms relatively limited. This habit might be caused by the misconceptions that have been built among teachers. For effective implementation, there was a need of discarding the misunderstanding.

In connection with the preceding, this article observes that the constructivist approach has not been explained systematically the learner centered practices for guiding teachers in the classrooms. The approach has not provided clear instructions to teachers on how to interpret principles and characteristics into the real teaching and learning practices. This phenomenon is likely to be one of the reasons that have been causing difficulties and poor implementation. The foregoing weakness confirms what Silverthorn (1999) said, "Piaget himself did not design instructional strategies, but educators have interpreted Piaget's theory to suggest broad instructional principles" (p.3).

Moreover, Schweisfurth (2013) observed the classes that make use of traditional seating arrangement where students' desks are facing the chalkboard. It causes contradiction to the learner centered teaching prescribed by the competence based curriculum. This structure is common to many national and cultural contexts that implement the learner centered teaching. In this regard, teachers do not show any effort to organize students for effective interactions. They have been compromising with traditional seating arrangement due to several challenges in the learning environment. Teachers perceived that interactive seating plan might be impossible.

In the same perspective, Cowen and Kazamias (2009) described the profiles of various countries regarding the learner centered teaching. Scholars demonstrated the existence of a gap between policy and practices guided by this model. It is because the learner centered teaching has not been conducted as it is instructed in the

competence based curriculum. There are difficulties connected with teachers, students, learning environment, and other factors that interfere the learner centered teaching. Several studies show that the shift from teacher centered to learner centered teaching is not well implemented in the classrooms. It is as if this transformation has been failing in several nations.

Conclusions made on the implementation of the learner centered teaching

Research works conducted in various national and cultural contexts provided conclusions about the implementation of the learner centered teaching. Researchers reached these conclusions after observing the actual teaching and learning practices in several educational systems. The reports affirmed that curricula of many countries put emphasis on the learner centered teaching. However, teachers have been continuing with the teacher centered approach (Brackenbury, 2012; Cowen & Kazamias, 2009; Tabulawa, 2013; Vavrus, 2009).

The above scholars proved that in spite of various initiatives and efforts towards the learner centered teaching, the classroom practices have not changed. It shows that the shift from teacher to learner centered teaching is likely to be not smooth. The scholars who conducted research in various national and cultural contexts (Hiebert & Stigler, 2004) spoke about this phenomenon. They stated that “improving classroom teaching is a hard work; the literature is filled with stories of good intentions to change teaching followed by a disappointing return to traditional methods of practice” (p.10). In addition, to the same perspective, Cowen and Kazamias (2009) indicated that the idea of learner centered teaching is not occurring as it was intended. This trend might be caused by paradigm shift in theory but it does not yet transform teachers’ actual classroom practices. It can be clarified as the difference that occurred between teachers’ adopted theory and their theory in use (Alexander, 2000).

Other scholars presented reports that were encouraging to some extent. They provided the possibility for teachers to focus on flexibility and on the use of range of practices that support students learning. Teachers should search various classroom practices that appropriately facilitate learning. They are backed by the study of OECD (2009) which argued to confirm that there is no single or well-defined best way of teaching. What is needed in such a situation is the combination of constructivist and more direct methods. Similarly, Maloy and LaRoche (2010) strongly promoted the application of the learner centered practices and suggested group discussion, debate, creative writing, and cooperative learning. Therefore, for students to benefit in the learner centered environment, teachers need to be well acquainted with the learner centered practices. They should possess appropriate knowledge, skills, and strategies on how to guide students learning the subject matter successfully.

This article interprets the situation discussed by researchers as generally not optimistic. Therefore, it suggests that individual efforts have to be made to address the challenges. Educators should conduct research in various national and cultural contexts to examine and acquire real insights of the learner centered teaching. The results from studies should guide thorough discussion among educators and finally might come to the consensus on the genuine teaching and learning practices. In addition, it is important to know that performing research in various countries is connected to roles/purposes/functions of the comparative process (Thomas, 1990). According to the scholar, comparison can help us to understand, to extend our insights, and to sharpen our perspectives. If we wish to know something well, many writers tell us, we must examine it in comparison (p.277).

Through comparison educators can get a chance of observing and learning from most successful education systems. They see how provision of education and specifically implementation of the learner centered teaching is achieved. Based on this fact, it could be concluded that comparative analysis might be the appropriate solution for challenges of the learner centered teaching and learning practices. Comparative analysis supports the purpose of studying these practices progressively to reveal changes in the course. This field of study is considered more active and appropriate in providing information about the progress of the implementation of the learner centered teaching. It is supported by Cowen and Kazamias (2009) who confirmed that sound comparative education should have been changing over time. Furthermore, Schweisfurth (2013) regards comparative education as essential, since the learner centered teaching has not far been proved to be a simple approach used in teaching. Alexander (2000) suggested countries to learn from each other in a comparative way. In this regard, educators get a chance of judging their practices in relation to other several countries. Through comparison educators understand, extend insights, and sharpen their perspectives. If educators want to know practices well they examine by comparing (Thomas, 1990).

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