

7-2013

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## Recommended Citation

Mckenna, Sioux (2013) "The Dangers of Student-Centered Learning – A Caution about Blind Spots in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 7: No. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2013.070206>

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# The Dangers of Student-Centered Learning – A Caution about Blind Spots in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

## **Abstract**

Student-centered learning is an increasingly popular approach that shifts the focus from the teacher to the student. The approach argues that we need to have a clear understanding of who our students are and what their needs are in order for us to provide quality education. This paper applauds the focus on the student but raises two concerns about absences in this approach. Firstly, student-centered approaches rarely consider the actual knowledge being taught and learnt. There is little consideration of how the disciplinary knowledge is constructed and what norms and values underpin such constructions. Secondly, student-centered approaches are often undertaken within the dominant autonomous discourse where student success or failure is seen to result from characteristics inherent in the student. She is understood as an individual rather than as a member of a larger social group and there is equally little acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of universities and the practices within them.

## **Keywords**

Student-centered learning, Scholarship of teaching and learning

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## **The Dangers of Student-Centered Learning – A Caution about Blind Spots in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

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### **Abstract**

Student-centered learning is an increasingly popular approach that shifts the focus from the teacher to the student. The approach argues that we need to have a clear understanding of who our students are and what their needs are in order for us to provide quality education. This paper applauds the focus on the student but raises two concerns about absences in this approach. Firstly, student-centered approaches rarely consider the actual knowledge being taught and learnt. There is little consideration of how the disciplinary knowledge is constructed and what norms and values underpin such constructions. Secondly, student-centered approaches are often undertaken within the dominant autonomous discourse where student success or failure is seen to result from characteristics inherent in the student. She is understood as an individual rather than as a member of a larger social group and there is equally little acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of universities and the practices within them.

### **Rise in Student-Centered Approaches**

Internationally, universities are claiming that their approaches are student-centered. The term is also regularly invoked in teaching strategies, mission, vision and goal documents. The idea behind student-centeredness is simple: the student is often neglected in the educational endeavor and so we need to consciously foreground her. We need to get a clearer understanding of who our students are, where they come from, and what they need.

As higher education has tackled the massive changes brought about by the shift to a knowledge economy and the resultant massification of the sector, it has had to address issues of diversity in numbers like never before. The university is accommodating more working class students, more students who do not have the university's language of instruction as their home language, and more students who come from countries far away from where the university is physically positioned. Massive changes in technology have also driven shifts in our understandings of what a university education is for and how it should be offered.

These changes have meant that many academics have sought to move from a traditional teaching-centered approach to one that takes more account of this diverse student body. In student-centered approaches the focus is on students' needs, abilities and interests and the teacher becomes a facilitator of the students' learning. The term is very loosely used to encompass a range of approaches such as flexible learning, experiential learning, and self-directed learning (O'Neill and McMahon 2005), but the defining characteristic seems to be that student-centeredness is contrasted to teacher-centeredness (Rogers and Freiberg 1994).

### **Absenting knowledge**

While this move to student-centered approaches has largely been lauded in the literature, there have been some concerns raised too. In a general critique of the sociology of education research in 1990, Bernstein argued that very little note had been taken of the pedagogic discourse itself; this also seems to be a blind spot in the literature on student-centered approaches. As Maton (2000a, 2000b) explains, the pedagogic discourse of each discipline or field has its own intrinsic features and we need to pay attention to these. Student-centered learning, in its singular focus on the students' needs, fails to take sufficiently into account what the discipline 'needs' or, more precisely put, what the knowledge and knower structures of the discipline are and how are these legitimated (Maton 2000b).

The focus on the students' needs should not be at the expense of a focus on the powerful knowledge the students seek to get access to and what the specific legitimation rules are for that knowledge. Indeed, in the inaugural edition of *IJSOTL*, Kreber (2007) called on Palmer to argue that it is subject-centered learning rather than student-centered learning that is needed. Others have made this call in terms of a need for 'learning-centered approaches' (O'Brien, Millis and Cohen 2009). We need to show students how knowledge is produced within the discipline in ways that are interesting and accessible so that they too can produce such knowledge, and so that they can critique and develop the disciplinary knowledge production processes further.

It should be clarified that these critiques of aspects of student-centered approaches are not calls for a return to traditional teacher-centered approaches. I think most scholars of teaching and learning would agree that an understanding of students and their needs is crucial to good practice. But there is a concern that a focus on the student, in ways that range from everyday conceptions to psychologized theories, should not be at the expense of a focus on the disciplinary knowledge itself.

### **The Autonomous Learner**

A further concern is that the focus on the student, called for in the student-centered approach, is often undertaken within a dominant autonomous discourse. Street (1995, 2005) indicates that the autonomous account of learning assumes that the practices expected for success in education are independent of historical and social context. Boughey (2012) explains that a discourse of the autonomous learner constructs the student as an individual devoid of history and socio-cultural norms who succeeds or fails in higher education by virtue of characteristics inherent within her.

She is motivated and hard-working (or, the more fashionable version of this, she has self-efficacy). She is cognitively gifted. She has potential. She is good at languages, math or writing. While there are many versions of these explanations of success, they all relate to characteristics inherent within the individual. And while we rarely articulate the counterpoints to these, they are also always there: she is tardy and lacks motivation, she is none too bright, she is short of potential, she lacks ability.

Such a meritocratic understanding that it is the attributes within the individual that are the primary determinants of success or failure is problematic in South Africa. More than 50% of our undergraduates do not complete their studies and black South Africans are far less likely to succeed than their white counterparts (Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007). The autonomous learner discourse, if taken to its logical conclusion in relation to these statistics, can be revealed to be both elitist and racist. And yet the autonomous learner

discourse remains enormously powerful in accounting for failure and dropout rates in South Africa (Boughey 2009, Boughey 2010, Boughey and McKenna 2011a, Boughey and McKenna 2011b).

These understandings are not, however, peculiar to my country. Despite the 'social turn' in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Gee 2000), most explanations of higher education success continue to focus exclusively on aspects of individual psychology over systemic, social accounts. Much of the scholarship of teaching and learning places the research spotlight primarily on attributes of students, autonomously of their social contexts. It also ignores the social contexts of the institution and the disciplines within it.

It is not difficult to see why such ways of accounting for student failure remain dominant. It is far easier to identify and remediate deficiencies in the individual than to consider how universities function and whether all social groups have equal access to our 'ways of being' (Gee 2000). It is only by ignoring the numerous theoretical explanations of how higher education practices privilege those with particular kinds of cultural capital (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1977) and how university systems are often structured in ways that deny powerful knowledge to particular groups (see, for example, Giroux 2007), that we are able to remain innocent.

But retaining our innocence while working in a system that marginalizes large segments of society is difficult. Research tells us that success in higher education does not correlate to race or language or gender, or even consistently to intelligence, but that socio-economic class plays a key role (see, for example, Yorke and Longden 2004).

This is not to argue that individual academics and indeed many universities are all willfully complicit in a system of inequity. Many are working at all sorts of levels to transform the university to ensure that powerful knowledge is accessible to all who desire it. But research suggests we have a long way to go before both physical access to universities and epistemological access to the knowledge within them is widely available (Morrow 2009). And in this undertaking, we need to be vigilant to the ways in which the social justice agenda is subverted by dominant interests.

The concept of 'student-centeredness' emerges from a belief that higher education can play a role in social justice but it is just one example of a term where the original intention has been shifted in subtle yet dangerous ways. Student-centeredness can just be another means of focusing on deficiencies in individual students if the approach is implemented within the dominant discourse of the autonomous learner.

Hegemonic discourses, such as the autonomous learner discourse, are so normalized that their power is exceptionally hard to critique (Gramsci 1971) and so we barely notice their effects. This is not to say we are powerless but rather than we need to be more vigilant. We need to be on guard for the ways in which the concept of student-centeredness is being misused.

The student-centered focus on the learner has the potential to absolve the academic, the department, the discipline, the knowledge and the university - and thereby absolve them of responsibility. By focusing on the student, it is possible that we might fail to examine the role all these other aspects of university life have to play in student success and failure. By being student centered and designing curricula for the multiple intelligences and learning styles of our students, we may fail to consider how our institutions and practices are ideological or to consider whether our socially constructed expectations might be more readily available to some social groups to others.

## Conclusion

I am not for a minute suggesting we shouldn't care about our students or that we shouldn't go to great lengths to find out who our students are. But our focus on the student would greatly benefit from a more social lens rather than the current individualized accounts of the student bringing inherent skills and attributes (or failing to do so). What we need is theoretical pluralism (Yorke and Longden 2004). It is not only motivation and cognitive ability that the student brings to the university. She also comes with norms and values and practices from school and home and then has to confront the often-alienating norms, values and practices of the university.

I am arguing that we need to focus on our students within an understanding of the socially constructed nature of our disciplines and universities. We need to hold up a strong critical lens to the structure and culture of the university. There is much talk about underprepared students, but is it possible that as higher education becomes more equitable, what we have is a case of underprepared universities struggling to adapt to the challenges they face?

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