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LEARNING



THE LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOM

Jeannette Campos

atd

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

THE LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOM



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Oftentimes professionals find themselves responsible for leading classrooms without any formal preparation in instruction or classroom dynamics. They may be subject matter experts who are called upon to provide training for workplace learning, or they may be deep experts who choose to teach in classrooms of higher education. During the course of my career, I've worked with many people who find themselves in this situation, whether adjunct faculty, college professors, or guest speakers in training events. Many of them find the task daunting, and in preparing for the responsibility of providing and building dynamic classrooms, they are searching for a framework to help them understand the classroom and connect with the learners in it.

This *TD at Work* is written for both novices in search of a simple and meaningful way to develop their instructional skills and seasoned practitioners who are looking for a new or different way to freshen their instructional approach. This issue is also valuable to any learners who want to more fully engage with their classroom-based learning and encourage more balanced, learner-centered instruction.

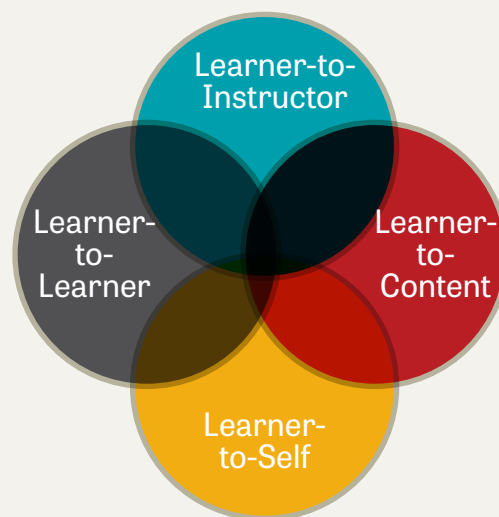
Learner-centered instruction is an important and simple way for any practitioner to prepare a classroom that offers the best experience for the participant. When the learner—rather than the instructor—is the focus of the instruction, the learning becomes more meaningful to the participant, provides more opportunities for the learner to engage with the content, builds more connections to improve knowledge transfer, and encourages a variety of teaching methods within the learning event.

In a learner-centered classroom, the student takes ownership of the content, determines ways that it may be useful or relevant, and builds the relationships that will allow the learning to endure.

This *TD at Work* will show you how to:

- describe the four relationships within any classroom, whether online or face to face
- list different instructional techniques that will maximize the learning relationships within your classroom

LEARNER-CENTERED DESIGN



- balance your approach to instruction so that your classroom is more learner-centered and learning-rich.

LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOMS: IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Professionals who will be instructing for the first time often don't know where to start. It's not uncommon for their design conversations to begin with, "I have a great idea for an activity I want to use," or, "I have a PowerPoint with all of my content, and I'm planning to teach from that," and "I'm struggling with how to organize all the information; there is so much the students need to know!"

Deciding what to teach and how to teach doesn't have to be arbitrary. In addition to the many learning theories and models of instructional systems design from which to choose, there are other ways to think about instruction and the learning event. For example, I often look to the principles of design thinking to help me decide how to organize a classroom. Design thinking is inherently human centered;

LEARNER-CENTERED CLASSROOMS

Rather than designing the classroom from the instructor's perspective, consider designing the classroom from the learner's perspective. Similar to the principles of human-centered design, this approach encourages the design of learner-centered instruction. In learner-centered classrooms, there are four primary relationships. Attending to each will allow for more meaningful, durable learning to occur.

1. **The learner-to-instructor relationship:** Consider how to develop a trusting and encouraging dynamic between each learner and the instructor.
2. **The learner-to-content relationship:** Consider how to develop a meaningful and sustainable connection between each learner and the material being taught.
3. **The learner-to-learner relationship:** Consider how to develop an interactive and supportive rapport among the learners in a learning event.
4. **The learner-to-self relationship:** Consider how to develop an honest and reflective bond between the learner and herself.

and empathy is at the core of human-centered design. Looking at the classroom from the learners' perspective and empathizing with how they experience the learning event is a practical and meaningful way for instructors to prepare their course. While it might seem nuanced, or too slight a difference to matter, putting the learner—rather than the instructor—at the center of the instructional experience makes all kinds of new relationships possible and expands the framework from which the instruction is designed.

LOOKING AT THE CLASSROOM FROM THE LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE AND EMPATHIZING WITH HOW THEY EXPERIENCE THE LEARNING EVENT IS A PRACTICAL AND MEANINGFUL WAY FOR INSTRUCTORS TO PREPARE THEIR COURSE.

Learner-centered instruction offers a different way to have the conversation about how to teach and how to design a learning event. It takes an empathetic approach to learning from the vantage point of the participant. As the name implies, in a learner-centered classroom the design of instruction shifts focus from who will be teaching and what will be taught, to who will be learning and how they will participate. For those professionals who are not instructional designers or trained instructors, a learner-centered classroom can relieve a lot of pressure. If a subject matter expert has never led instruction before, she may be concerned about being the center of attention and anxious about being the sole authority in the classroom. Professionals who find themselves in these positions often remark, "I have deep subject matter expertise, but I don't know how to teach." Because learner-centered instruction changes the dynamics in a classroom, teaching is less important than learning. The learner experience is prioritized over the instructor experience, and relationships are the centerpiece of the classroom—not expertise. There are four primary relationships in the learner-centered classroom:

- the learner-to-instructor relationship
- the learner-to-content relationship
- the learner-to-learner relationship
- the learner-to-self relationship.

The Learner-to-Instructor Relationship

Of all the relationships within a classroom, the learner-to-instructor is perhaps the most obvious. From our formative experiences in education, most of us are familiar with hierarchical classrooms with the teacher in the front and the students in their seats. Typically, the instructor is the leading expert and the provider of information and knowledge. Teaching occurs when the instructor shares this information with, or transfers it to, the students.

Most adult learners arrive in the workplace or a higher education classroom with a similar expectation—they enter with a passive mindset

and anticipate the interactions in a classroom to be unilateral. The instructor will pass on information through briefings, lectures, and presentations; these are the ways that the instructor demonstrates knowledge and mastery of the content. In exchange, the participants will sit passively and “learn.”

In a learner-centered classroom, the instructor is still present and expertise of the content is still as important. The difference in approach is very slight. When designing for the learner-centered classroom, the instructor’s first question is not, “What do I want to teach?” but rather, “What does the learner need to know?”

In the design of most learning events, the relationship between the instructor and the student is prioritized. Even so, the relationship between the instructor and the learner is likely the most perishable of all. It exists during the learning event, but has the fewest opportunities to meaningfully extend beyond that. It occurs, and is largely confined to, the time and space in which the learning event is scheduled. So, although most instructors invest considerable time in developing the learner-to-instructor relationship, it is the least durable of the four relationships that a learner might develop in a classroom.

SO, ALTHOUGH MOST INSTRUCTORS INVEST CONSIDERABLE TIME IN DEVELOPING THE LEARNER-TO-INSTRUCTOR RELATIONSHIP, IT IS THE LEAST DURABLE OF THE FOUR RELATIONSHIPS THAT A LEARNER MIGHT DEVELOP IN A CLASSROOM.

One key concept to remember when you are designing a classroom and focusing on the learner-to-instructor relationship is design thinking. It’s not about “us versus them” or even “us on behalf of them.” For the design thinker, it has to be “us with them.” And I believe the same is true of instructors and learners. The human-centered learning experience should be collaborative and co-owned, jointly relying

DEVELOPING THE LEARNER-TO-INSTRUCTOR RELATIONSHIP

Key questions to ask when advancing the learner-to-instructor relationship:

- Am I controlling the classroom discussion only to the degree necessary?
- Am I allowing opportunities for others to contribute to the discussion?
- Am I asking enough questions and encouraging participation?
- Is my inquiry open and honest?
- Am I tolerant of diverse viewpoints?
- Am I encouraging positive experimentation and generating a culture of optimism?
- Would I want to be a learner in this classroom?

on the participation and contributions of both the instructor and the learner. Approaching the classroom from the student perspective best allows these dynamics to emerge, and the learner-to-instructor relationship deepens and broadens.

The Learner-to-Content Relationship

The learner-to-content relationship is often taken for granted in the classroom. Because it seems self-evident that students are in a classroom to receive new information or develop a new skill, it is frequently assumed that the participant is learning; that the information is taking hold and the learner is making sense of the new material. What this approach lacks is a focus on what the learner needs from the content, as well as a verification of what meaning the learner has derived from the instruction. A learner-centered approach emphasizes the relationship between the learner and the content, and ensures that a meaningful connection has developed.

Cultivating the learner-to-content relationship requires that the classroom provides time and space for each learner to interact with the