



Teaching Matters

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Student-Centered Instruction Across the Disciplines

by

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I love teaching! My name is Dr. Carletta Perry and I am a Psychologist and Life Coach, a Professor, a Christian, a Wife, a Daughter, a Sister, a Friend, and a Mentor. My purpose and my passion is helping others to achieve their best, whatever that looks like for them, and providing the tools so that others can live a “self-actualized” life. I carry this purpose everywhere I go and my passion is heard in my voice and seen in my actions. When I began teaching many years ago, I consciously decided that I did not want to just teach, I also wanted to learn. I knew that I had plenty to offer in my education, career experience, and life experience; however, I also quickly realized that students had much to teach me, which humbled my character and allowed me to see the student as a person who was a future colleague - a man or a woman trying to change the outcome of life with education, a wife or husband, a sister or a brother, and a friend. Every time I walked into the classroom, I saw people who I believed wanted to change their lives like I did through education, not just a group of students. Think for a moment and ask yourself the question, How do you help your students to become their best? Hampton University’s focus is on academic excellence. Many faculty members heard this charge and said, “the students must do better.” I heard this charge and said, “I must do better!”

Achieving academic excellence will require both teacher and student to “do better,” but as the primary change agent, I give the responsibility to the teachers (the word “teacher” is not limited to professors, but everyone who interacts with students). We must become a part of the change. There has to be a paradigm shift in how we teach. I propose a “student-centered” approach vs. the “teacher-centered” approach to instruction. “Teacher-centered” instruction has been the norm for a long time. In “teacher-centered” instruction, the teacher is regarded as the expert; the student plays a receptive, passive role; and teaching style is based upon the teacher’s learning style, although many times teaching is in the form of lecture only.

Now, think of your favorite teacher from high school, college or graduate school. What made this person your favorite? My favorite teacher was Mrs. Saunders because she worked with the class as a group, but also made each of us, individually feel special in her one-on-one interactions. She was intelligent and taught well, but she also mentored. In return, I was excited about going to class; enthused about what she was going to teach and how she was going to get the message across; honored that she was my teacher; and the

whole class had a wonderful experience, because we knew she cared about our success. Mrs. Saunders is an example of the “student-centered” approach to teaching. Unlike the “teacher-centered” approach, the “student-centered” approach views the student as an expert, too; the student’s voice is necessary for critical thinking and discussion. There is a focus on the needs, abilities, interests, and learning style of the students. Students are active participants in their learning, and the teacher is the *facilitator* of the learning process.

The focus on “student-centered” instruction was the result of a paradigm shift that took place in the 19th century by educators and psychologists. This desperate need for a change in how we do “teaching” became relevant and is still relevant when we look at the number of students unprepared for college personally and academically, and the number of students who are not graduating from high school or college, especially African-American students. Because of these statistics, our students fail in academics, but also in life.

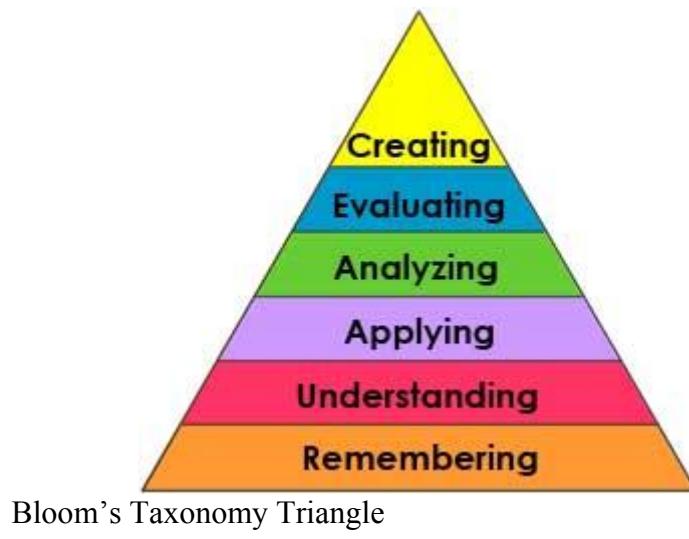
The “student-centered” approach to instruction focuses on helping students to succeed in academics and, ultimately, in life. “Student-centered instruction allows students to actively participate in discovery learning processes from an autonomous viewpoint. Students consume the entire class time constructing a new understanding of the material being taught without being passive, but rather proactive. A variety of hands-on activities are administered in order to promote successful learning. Unique, yet distinctive learning styles are encouraged in a “student-centered” classroom. With the use of valuable learning skills, students are capable of achieving life-long learning goals, which can further enhance student motivation in the classroom. This approach has many implications for the design of curricula, course content and process, classroom management and self-care tips for the instructor.

How do you become more student-centered?

1. Design of Curricula.

A. Rigor: Sometimes, less is more. A lesson that incorporates a brief lecture along with a hands-on activity can be enjoyed by the students and the teacher. A shorter test that has a carefully selected, well-constructed, variety of questions can be more rigorous than a randomly selected, 100 question multiple-choice test.

B. Bloom’s Taxonomy. Bloom’s Taxonomy is a way of thinking. It is not a tool, but rather a way to facilitate the learning process. It shows the process from lower order thinking to higher order thinking. It proposes that our learning begins in this order: Remembering to Understanding to Applying to Analyzing to Evaluating to Creating. Lessons that include all levels are ideal, but if you design beginning of the semester assignments to assess lower level skills and later assessments to address higher level skills, that progression is best. For more information, go to: <http://edorigami.wikispaces.com/Bloom's+Digital+Taxonomy>.



Learning techniques and percentage of information retained by students

C. Learning Outcomes. Learning outcomes should be based on what you want your students to know, understand, and be able to do. However, learning outcomes should be incorporated into every lesson. For example, you would indicate “This project addresses the following course outcomes,” and list the number and description accordingly. Be sure there is a clear tie to course outcomes at all levels of Blooms Taxonomy. For more information on creating outcomes and incorporating Bloom’s Taxonomy, go to: <http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/RevisedBlooms1.html>.

2. Course Content and Process.

A. Learning Styles. The term, “learning styles,” refers to the way we learn. Two components of how we learn include our preferred “intake mode” and our preferred “method of synthesizing information.” Since these vary for the teacher and the student, we must plan lessons that reflect the differences and incorporate a range of activities. There are three (3) main learning “intake modes”: (1) Audio, which relies on hearing. Students learn best from lectures, music, and verbal messages; (2) Visual, which allows students to see and read information. Students learn most effectively with pictures, graphs, illustrations, diagrams, photos and other visual material; and (3) Kinesthetic, which is learning by doing. These students like to feel, touch, work with material, and relate to others. Workshops, teamwork, performing,

collecting samples, and role-playing help this type of learner. When planning your lesson, remember how much information is *retained* by the student depends upon the teaching methods that you use.

B. Active Learning. Active learning is not collaborative learning, where professor and student are placed on equal standing in the classroom. In fact, the professor is still the expert/mentor for the class and the material, but the student is the expert on him/herself and his/her learning style. The professor utilizes techniques that facilitate active learning, which can be anything a student can do actively rather than passively, e.g., listening. Here are some examples that can be utilized in the classroom: relevant issues debates, a one-minute paper on what you learned today, muddiest point/say one thing you learned today, class discussions, class experiments, role-play, demonstrations, student presentations, videos, music, incorporating technology, use of student smart phones to look up information in the classroom, and real-life connections, where you make an issue personal by sharing stories (i.e., we talked about what it feels like to have a relative who has Alzheimer's disease during a lesson on memory).

C. Rubrics. Feedback, in general, is very important. I use it as a way to stay in touch with my students. Although students visit me in my office regularly, I call them on the phone if they are missing classes or assignments. I email grade updates if I see their grades are dropping, and I write personal notes on their papers for both improvement and encouragement. Rubrics are a new favorite, because providing students with rubrics allows them to clearly understand the expectations. Rubrics also allow professors to objectively grade assignments and provide specific feedback to students. For information on creating rubrics by grade level, subject and type, go to: <http://www.rcampus.com/rubricshellc.cfm?mode=gallery&sms=publicrub>.

3. Classroom Management and Self-Care. As a psychologist, I believe in the importance of taking care of one's self in order to continue giving to others and being one's best. Otherwise, "burn out" can occur due to chronic stress and feeling overwhelmed over long periods of time, resulting in loss of motivation, low creativity, depression, lack of patience, and poor communication skills. Therefore, it is important to take care of your needs first, so that you can be focused, creative, motivated, positive, patient, and communicate a genuine sense of compassion and helpfulness to your students. Remember, fellow teachers, you alone are an amazing change agent for a student's motivation and success! Here are some tips for self-care:

- *Remind yourself that if teaching were easy, everyone would be doing it.* Teaching in front of a classroom, full of students, can be challenging, but on the other hand, very rewarding.
- *Keep a positive attitude about your students.* Try to see what they can accomplish and find creative ways to help them reach their potential. Your attitude will come across to your students, so it is important to be in good mental shape.
- *Remember, students are just like you and me.* They are also future colleagues, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, etc., with responsibilities, pressures, jobs, and other classes with other assignments.
- *Use failing grades or missed assignments as teaching moments to make a special connection with a student that will help him/her get back on track.*
- *Deal with student issues, privately and not in front of the class, before you become irritated, impatient or upset.* We are much more powerful

when we are centered, when we like our students, and when we view our students with fondness rather than impatience.

- *If, by chance, you feel that you have spoken sharply in an attempt to manage your students, own up to it.* For example, "Wow, that sounded harsh. Forgive me!"
- *Put a positive, welcome statement in your syllabus;* re-read the tone of your syllabus and try not to over-use exclamation points, bold print, underlining, or statements of reprimand.
- *Do a check-in every so often with students as a class* for a few minutes by just talking casually about life and school stressors and offering feedback.
- *Try to incorporate praise into all you do.* Believe in them (your students) and then, tell them so.
- *Mentor every student.* Our students need mentors desperately to survive academic as well as life's challenges. Remember, each one-teach one-reach one.

"Student-centered" instruction can be utilized across disciplines and offers benefits to the students, the teachers, and to the University! The "student-centered" approach strengthens students' self-motivation and teaches them to be responsible for their own learning; promotes enhanced and active learning; reduces disruptive behavior and promotes mutual respect; promotes healthy student-teacher communication; enhances academic quality in the classroom and promotes academic excellence in the community; and builds lasting relationships with future alumni and supporters of the University.