

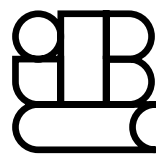
Learner-Centered Teaching

Five Key Changes
to Practice

Maryellen Weimer



JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Company
San Francisco



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*For my aunt Barbara R. Friz,
in celebration of our splendid friendship
and in honor of her ninth decade*

Preface

With more books on instruction than most faculty members have time to read and few professional incentives that encourage faculty to read pedagogical material, it seems prudent to begin by asking why. Why do we need yet another book on learning and teaching? It may be that authors lack some objectivity when it comes to answering the question, but it seems to me that there are five reasons that might be offered in support of this particular book. I did not have them this clearly in mind when I started, but as I now see the book in its entirety, I believe they justify yet another book on pedagogy, specifically one that explores how teaching might facilitate more and better learning.

This particular book is needed because after many years, the higher education community has finally discovered learning, and we need resources that further cultivate and capitalize on that interest. That we have so long ignored learning is somewhat difficult to explain. It seems more a case of benign neglect than willful rejection. Most of us just assumed that learning was an automatic, inevitable outcome of good teaching, and so we focused on developing our teaching skills. That we all but exclusively focused on them is a fact documented by even a cursory content review of the pedagogical literature. Its books, journals, magazines, and other publications address every aspect of how to teach, beginning with planning and ending with evaluation. No corresponding cadre of volumes describes learning at this level of detail.

As a result, practicing pedagogues know considerably less about learning than they do about teaching. We need resources that direct attention to learning in the same way they have focused attention on teaching. However, we do need to understand that the previous disconnect between teaching and learning has proved

counterproductive. The learning outcomes of teaching cannot be assumed or taken for granted. This book aims to cultivate our understanding of learning, and it does so by connecting that knowledge to instructional practice. It addresses a simple question—the same question we should have been asking as we considered teaching: What do we know about learning that implicates teaching? That makes this book about learning also a book about teaching.

Second, despite the widespread interest in learning, few resources translate the talk into concrete policies and practices. Few identify the things a teacher should do if instruction is to promote learning. I am regularly perplexed and dismayed at how ideas and issues in higher education become trendy and faddish. Conferences feature them as themes, periodical publications prepare special issues on the topic, and blue ribbon committees write reports on their state within institutions. But does all this attention generate change in instructional practice? I am doubtful, in part because most of the talk occurs at such a high level of abstraction. The discourse advocates for learning, but seldom gets down to the level of detail. We are now all in favor of learning, just as we all aspire to be thin, but we have not changed what we cook and serve students.

To produce change at the level of practice, we need to translate what we know about learning into concrete instructional policies and practices. We need resources that set out to teachers who want to promote learning what to do about attendance, assignments, tests, papers, lecturing, group work, classroom management, content, and grades. I believe that most faculty care about learning and would like to teach in ways that promote it. If resources would deal with the nuts and bolts of instructional practice, I think most faculty would attend and start making some of those changes.

It would be presumptuous and inappropriate to present a definitive set of policies and practices that promote learning, but faculty need ideas and examples, and that is what this book aims to provide. It seeks to answer this question: What should teachers *do* in order to maximize learning outcomes for their students? It aspires to move the talk about learning down to the level of details and to make it more nourishing. I am concerned that if we continue to feed the interest in learning with nothing more than rhetoric, it will not flourish and grow into better instructional practice.

Third, we need resources that propose learner-centered strategies based on what is known about learning. The need to connect practice to what has been discovered empirically is obvious. Behind all the policies, practices, and behaviors used to facilitate learning ought to be some theoretical or empirical rationale. The justification ought to be more substantive than doing something because it has always been done that way. And yet many of us have taught for years, operating from an eclectic, idiosyncratic knowledge base grounded almost exclusively on personal experience. It is as if the two closely related territories of research and practice are separate planets, unknown and seemingly inaccessible to one another.

Who should build the bridges necessary to connect research and practice? Those who do the research tend not to be faculty who daily face passive students who are taking required courses. I once worked with a well-known researcher who studies college students and has multiple books and publications to show for it. We were working on a project in which we conducted focus group interviews with students. My colleague was very excited; I was amazed and appalled when I discovered why. "This is the first time I've done a research project where we actually talked with students," this researcher told me.

After that experience, I thought differently about the propriety of researchers' drawing implications from their findings. But if not researchers, should the task be left to practitioners untrained in the relevant disciplines? As it stands now, the task is the responsibility of no one, and so few in the academy try to connect research and practice. Those of us who do build the bridges with no blueprints to follow and few rewards to honor our work. But we keep building because it seems so clear to us that these territories are beneficially connected in theory and practice.

Looking toward practice from the research side, it is clear that teaching needs to change in some fundamental ways. I have confessed to some of my colleagues that I am glad I am writing this book now and not at the beginning of my career when my skin was thin and optimism unrelenting. Many will find the changes I propose disturbing. They challenge long-held assumptions and traditional ways of thinking about instructional roles and responsibilities. I expect they will spark controversy. My hope is that this disagreement will motivate others to review the research, study the

theory, reflect on practice, and then build better and stronger bridges between research and practice. Much more of what we do in the classroom needs to be based on what we know.

In addition, but in some ways in contrast to resources that build on the empirical knowledge base, we also need books on teaching and learning that treat the wisdom or practice with more intellectual robustness. What little scholarship that practicing pedagogues complete is almost exclusively experientially based. And what we have learned in the school of hard knocks and by the seat of our pants is definitely worth knowing and worth passing on. However, much of that knowledge is idiosyncratic, isolated, unreflective, nonanalytical, and sometimes even anti-intellectual, and it gets lost in the great undifferentiated mass of anecdotal evidence about teaching. This great repository of experiential knowledge—what is justifiably called the wisdom of practice—remains unknown and devalued. Until it becomes characterized by the kind of intellectual rigor that faculty associate with scholarship, it will ineffectively advance instructional causes.

We need books on teaching and learning that treat experiential knowledge more analytically and more objectively. I have aspired to write such a book, one that deeply and honestly traces my own growth and development as a teacher and positions my experience against that of many other pedagogues who are working to make teaching more learner-centered. My efforts do not stand alone; they need to be reported in the context of what is known and what others have experienced.

I have aspired to write a book that is more than just another technique-based, how-to treatment of teaching skills. It includes many techniques, because faculty find instructional details of great interest. But techniques need to be presented in ways that reflect the dynamic, complicated milieu in which they will be used. Having instructional techniques is one thing; being able to manage a repertoire of them is something quite else. Techniques need to be presented cognizant of the process by and through which they can be transformed to fit the content configurations of different disciplines. Techniques should not be presented as isolated ideas but as working parts of a coherent, integrated approach to teaching.

And finally, I have aspired to write a book on teaching and learning that is intellectually robust—one that makes us think,

challenges unexamined assumptions, asks hard questions, and does not offer facile answers. I wanted to write a book that makes us appreciate what hard, mentally stimulating work teaching and learning can be. That kind of book values, indeed honors, the wisdom of practice. We need many more books of that caliber.

Finally, we need this book because it offers a positive way to improve teaching. Despite efforts during the past twenty-five years, instructional improvement has been slow in coming. Little documentation can be summoned that supports overall improvement in the level of instructional quality. Faculty development continues to operate at the margins, thriving in times of supportive administrations and withering when the institutional commitment to the teaching “excellence” center culminates in being able to say that we have one.

Faculty development has taught us some important lessons, one of the clearest being that efforts to improve instruction cannot be based on premises of remediation and deficiency. If faculty must admit they have a problem before they get help, most never seek assistance. Ask faculty members if they are interested in improving their teaching, and the response is almost always defensive. “Why? Did somebody tell you I need to?” Or, “Why should I? Teaching doesn’t matter around here anyway.”

But asking the learning question changes the paradigm completely. What self-respecting, even curmudgeonly, faculty member can respond any way other than positively if asked, “Are you interested in how much and how well your students learn?” And once they have said yes, what we know about learning easily and clearly links to teaching. But now we talk about ways of changing teaching that promote more and better learning. It is no longer about what is wrong and ineffective; it is about what best achieves a goal that faculty endorse. This book makes a contribution by basing instructional improvement on a positive and productive paradigm.

Distinctions Worth Noting

A couple of distinctions about this book are worth noting. First, this book is about being learner-centered. Some may associate that with being student-centered and use the two terms interchangeably. I

make a number of significant distinctions between the two phrases and have chosen not to use the student-centered descriptor.

Being student-centered implies a focus on student needs. It is an orientation that gives rise to the idea of education as a product, with the student as the customer and the role of the faculty as one of serving and satisfying the customer. Faculty resist the student-as-customer metaphor for some very good reasons. When the product is education, the customer cannot always be right, there is no money-back guarantee, and tuition dollars do not “buy” the desired grades.

Being learner-centered focuses attention squarely on learning: what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning, and how current learning positions the student for future learning. The student is still an important part of the equation. In fact, we make the distinction between learner-centered instruction and teacher-centered instruction as a way of indicating that the spotlight has moved from teacher to student. When instruction is learner-centered, the action focuses on what students (not teachers) are doing.

Because the instructional action now features students, this learner-centered orientation accepts, cultivates, and builds on the ultimate responsibility students have for learning. Teachers cannot do it for students. They may set the stage, so to speak, and help out during rehearsals, but then it is up to students to perform, and when they do learn, it is the student, not the teacher, who should receive accolades.

One of this book’s reviewers recommended changing *learner-centered* to *learning-centered*. I opted not to make this change because I want to keep the focus on learners, on students, not as customers to be satisfied but as the direct recipients of efforts aimed at promoting learning. Learning is an abstraction, and much like content, for an audience that by its culture tends to gravitate toward that which is theoretical and abstract, I want to keep us firmly rooted and fixed on the direct object of our teaching: students. We do not want more and better learning at some abstract level; we need it specifically and concretely for the students we face in class. We do not need teaching connected to learning on some concep-

tual plane; we need instructional policies and practices with a direct impact on how much and how well students learn.

Finally, in addition to focusing on learning *and* students (as opposed to an exclusive student- or learning-centered focus), the learner-centered approach orients to the idea of “product quality” constructively. Being learner-centered is not about cowering in the competitive academic marketplace. It is not about kowtowing to student demands for easy options and is not about an ethically irresponsible diminution of academic standards in an attempt to placate “shoppers” who may opt to purchase educational products elsewhere. It is about creating climates in classes and on campus that advance learning outcomes. It is an orientation that advocates for more, not less, learning. It is about offering a better product.

Overview of the Contents

Chapter One recounts the story of how this book came to be and introduces the literature on learning on which it is based. Out of the experiences and literature described there, I have come to believe that in order to be learner-centered, instructional practice needs to change in five areas. Each of those changes is introduced and described in detail in Chapters Two through Six, with each change the focus of one chapter. These chapters are the heart of the book. The last three chapters are devoted to implementation details. Thus, this book is not just about what teachers need to do; it also addresses how they should go about implementing what has been proposed.

Chapter Two explores changes associated with the balance of power in the classrooms. It documents the extent to which faculty control learning processes and how those authoritarian, directive actions diminish student motivation and ultimately result in dependent learners, unwilling and unable to assume responsibility for their own learning. The solution is not an abrogation of legitimate faculty power—that born of content expertise and long experience as learners and teachers. Rather, it outlines some policies and practices with the potential to redress the power imbalance, ways that responsibly share power with students in the interest of positively influencing their motivation and learning.

Chapter Three tackles the function of content when the goal is instruction that promotes more and better learning. Here the problem is “coverage” and all that metaphor has come to imply about the amount and complexity of content necessary to gain credibility for a course and its instructor. But content coverage does not develop the learning skills needed to function effectively on the job and in society. When teaching is learner-centered, content is *used*, not *covered*, and it is used to establish a knowledge foundation, just as it has been. In addition, and just as important, content is used to develop learning skills. These learning skills are not only or mostly basic study skills, even though these are needed; they are the sophisticated skills necessary to sustain learning across a career and a lifetime. And finally, when teaching is learner-centered, it uses encounters with content to create an awareness of the self as a unique, individual learner. The function of content is enlarged and diversified, and this has implications for how much content can be covered in a course.

When teaching is learner-centered, the role of the teacher changes, as detailed in Chapter Four. Learner-centered teachers are guides, facilitators, and designers of learning experiences. They are no longer the main performer, the one with the most lines, or the one working harder than everyone else to make it all happen. The action in the learner-centered classroom features the students. Teaching action expedites learning. This includes the careful design of experiences, activities, and assignments through which the students encounter the content. It also includes being there during the encounter to offer guidance, explanations, wise counsel, critique, and encouragement. It means being there afterward with praise and with the kind of constructive critique that motivates an even better performance next time. It is a very different role for teachers who have sought to improve their teaching by cultivating effective presentation skills and one we are finding difficult to execute, even though we may understand and accept the intellectual rationale on which it rests.

Chapter Five’s contents are inextricably linked to those of Chapter Two. Faculty share power so that students can make more decisions about the terms and conditions of their learning, but with increased freedom comes more responsibility. The responsibility for learning changes when the environment is learner-centered.

Beset with poorly prepared, passive learners who are neither confident nor empowered, faculty have compensated by setting all the rules and conditions for learning. Learner-centered environments are not rule-bound, token economies but places where learners understand and accept the responsibilities that belong to them. They come to class not because an attendance policy requires them but because they see the activities and events of class time as making important contributions to their learning. They see themselves as growing into ever more responsible learners. To develop these kinds of students, faculty must use policies and practices that start students down the road to intellectual maturity.

And finally for the changes, Chapter Six describes how the purpose and processes of evaluation change when teaching is learner-centered. As evaluation activities have come to be used to generate grades, faculty have lost sight of how powerfully these activities can promote learning. Learner-centered teachers still give grades, but they do so in the course of a series of events carefully orchestrated to realize as much of the learning potential as possible. And evaluation processes change as well. No longer do faculty do all the evaluation, although they continue to do the final grading; peers and the learners themselves are involved in evaluation activities. The ability to self-assess accurately and constructively judge the work of peers is an essential learning skill that teachers have the responsibility to develop during their students' college years.

Chapters Seven through Nine deal with implementation issues. Successful implementation of learner-centered teaching depends to no small degree on the faculty members' ability to handle issues in three areas. Chapter Seven addresses a common response to learner-centered teaching: resistance from students and colleagues. Once faculty move to an approach to teaching that emphasizes learning, they tend to do so with considerable enthusiasm and are often surprised and dismayed when the reaction of others is quite the opposite. Students make clear, sometimes passively and sometimes openly, their preference for the way things used to be. Colleagues ask pointed questions and make comments about lowering standards and pandering to students. The chapter explores the sources of that resistance, what it looks like when it is expressed, and ways that teachers can respond so that students and colleagues can be helped to move beyond this initial response.

Along with resistance, a second key implementation issue involves the developmental processes associated with the movement of students from being passive, dependent learners to becoming autonomous, intrinsically motivated, and self-regulating. It is a growth process that does not happen automatically or all at once. Faculty who aspire to be learner-centered teachers must be able to intervene productively in the process. Chapter Eight discusses what is known about the development of students as learners and proposes ways to sequence and organize learning experiences so that they positively influence the developmental process.

And finally, for a variety of reasons, faculty often assume instructional improvement tasks alone and unaided. Imagining that this book is the colleague alongside a faculty member's efforts to become learner-centered, Chapter Nine offers general advice on instructional improvement and specific counsel when the change agenda is learner-centered teaching.

Structure of the Change Chapters

Chapters Two through Six, each devoted to one of the five changes proposed to make teaching learner-centered, use the same organizational structure. This content is the heart of the book, and considering each area of change in terms of a shared set of chapter sections makes it easier to see how they are different but very much interdependent.

All begin by making the case against current instructional practice. The tone in these sections tends to be argumentative in order to make clear those aspects of current practice that I believe research has shown negatively affect learning outcomes. These sections then provide the rationale for change. I also use them for comparative purposes. The change can be seen and understood more clearly when it is benchmarked against current instructional practice.

The second section in these chapters defines, describes, and otherwise delineates the nature of the change. After exploring the change in detail, I identify what benefits it accrues. Sometimes these benefits turn out to be solutions to the problems identified in the first section. Other times the benefits accrue in areas unre-

lated to the problems. But in both cases, they are about improved learning outcomes.

The third section moves to the details, examples, and illustrations of the change operationalized as policies, practices, behaviors, assignments, and activities. For each of the changes, this is the section that answers the how-would-you-do-it question. It proposes a set of instructional practices that promote more and better learning. Not everything possible can be included in these sections, and certainly the examples themselves can be debated in terms of whether they effectively translate the relevant learning principles.

Each of these chapters ends with a section that raises the questions that have emerged out of my own efforts to implement learner-centered teaching. They are not questions I have found answered in the literature and yet seem central to the advancement of this approach to teaching. I deliberated at length about including a section like this. It seems risky to be writing a book before having all the answers. But I include them because I believe raising the hard, complicated questions and refusing to answer them in trite, simplistic ways demonstrates the intellectual richness that is part of critical reflective practice. Like many others, I am still in the process of learning to teach in this way. Moreover, as we tell students, sometimes we learn more from the questions than from the answers.

Although each of the five changes is discussed in a separate chapter, they are interconnected and overlapping. Some activities, assignments, and practices done to advance one may help to accomplish one of the others at the same time. Some of the changes are inseparably linked. For example, giving students more voice in the learning decisions that affect them (Chapter Two) should not occur unless those students accept the increased responsibility (Chapter Six) that is inherently a part of individual decision making.

Making teaching learner-centered requires nontrivial changes in instructional practices, even though all can (and probably should) be implemented incrementally. These changes are fundamental and far reaching. Most of us tend to improve our teaching by fussing around the edges, adding a new technique here and a different assignment there. Learner-centered teaching, in contrast,

represents an entirely new way of thinking about teaching and learning tasks and responsibilities. It is transformational. As you start down this road, you need to realize that it will take you to a very different instructional place. Sometimes I hardly recognize the teacher I have become.

Yet as comprehensive as these changes are, they do not constitute some radical departure from instructional sanity. This is not about giving away all instructor authority. It is not about content-free courses. It is not about some greatly diminished instructional role for the teacher. It is not about giving students more responsibility than they are prepared to handle. And it is not about students' assigning grades. Learner-centered teaching is responsible instruction. Best of all, it is about teaching in ways that promote more and better learning.

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April 2002

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Weimer has published widely and has served on the editorial boards of four journals. Since 1987, she has edited *Teaching Professor*, a monthly newsletter on college teaching. She has edited or authored eight books, including one on faculty development, one on teaching for new faculty, and an anthology edited with Robert Menges, *Teaching on Solid Ground*. Most recently, she was primary author of *Teaching Tools*, a collection of collaborative, active, and inquiry-based approaches to be used in conjunction with *Biological Perspectives*, an introductory biology textbook funded by the National Science Foundation and created by Biological Sciences Curriculum Studies.

