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How Learner-Centered Is It? An Instructor's Self-Inventory

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Developing a more learner-centered course design does not have to mean pulling everything up by the roots. A good start is to examine the activities already happening in your courses, finding where good learner-centered design principles already exist. Here, I look at two versions of an activity that is common in my own course designs: Peer Review. The first example is simple; the second example is more complex. Both are fully asynchronous, allowing learners to manage their time as their lives require. (*Honoring learner time and agency* is a learner-centered principle.) Along the way, as in the last sentence, I keep an eye out for learner-centered design principles that I can identify and name.

Example One: Peer Review and the Short Writing Prompt:

In small groups on an online discussion forum, learners write a short weekly post in response to a writing prompt asking them to integrate course readings with their own contexts and insights. (*Constructivism* is a learner-centered theory.) During the week following a due date, small-group classmates offer each other 2-3 sentences of substantive informal engagement, followed by a peer review embracing three yes-or-no elements: Balance (every element of the prompt receives attention); Engagement (the whole work is engaged substantively with the course and its materials); Mechanics (spelling, grammar, organization, citation). For the first 1/3 of the term, peer reviews are purely diagnostic: no revisions are needed, but learners MAY reach out to the instructor for guidance in response to feedback. (*Learners taking*

responsibility for learning is a learner-centered principle.) For the middle 1/3 of the term, learners getting two or more "No's" from peers must reach out to the instructor. For the final 1/3 of the term, learners getting any "No's" must reach out to the instructor. In practice, my role as instructor is mostly to provide guidance in the early weeks, rewarding (via recognition) social goods like risk-taking and commitment. (*Guide-on-the-side-style facilitation* is a learner-centered practice.)

Example Two: Peer Review and the Final Paper:

Bear with me on this one. There's this final research/thesis paper, see? (My course is "Introduction to the Hebrew Bible," and this is the notorious exegesis paper.) But a complete draft is due at the midterm...and by "complete draft" I mean Complete Draft: it's at the full word count and includes all of the expected elements of the final paper. Why? For many reasons, but relevant here: your small-group classmates need something complete to be able to peer-review it! So that's the "bad news" on the draft: it must be complete. What's the "good news"? The draft does not have to be particularly good! Because the Complete Draft does not count toward the student's grade in the class: this peer review is a formative evaluation, not a summative evaluation. (*Formative evaluation* is a learner-centered practice.) So, learner: in your draft, take risks! Try things! Get out on a limb! Pull out all the stops to try to articulate the things you are trying to say. (Creating conditions for *student voice* is a learner-centered principle.)

In order to promote informed, substantive peer review--something more illuminating than "I liked it; it was good"--students are armed with two (2) rubrics. First, there is the rubric for the final paper itself, made available to learners at the start of the term. (*Instructor transparency and accountability in assessment* is a learner-centered principle.) If reviewers have so far neglected this document or struggled with it, now they are put in a position to have to get to know it better and work with it constructively and ask for help if needed. The second rubric is the rubric for the peer reviews themselves. (Are the reviews engaged with the draft being reviewed? Are they engaged with the final-paper rubrics? Are they constructive as well as affirming?) Here I include one coercive element: 20% of a student's peer-review grade requires that *their own draft* be complete and on time, and this element is a binary: you get 20 points, or you get zero points. And here's the thing: the evaluation for peer reviews is not formative, but summative. This thing must go smoothly and tightly, or the wheels fall off. (Don't ask of learners more self-motivation than reasonable for their level: *scaffolding* is a learner-centered principle.)

Closing notes:

Learner-centered course design principles didn't descend from the sky on stone tablets. Rather, they arose from the reflected-upon experiences of educators like yourself. By joining in this process of reflection and discovery, you join in the construction of applied learner-centered pedagogy.

Where can you discover some more of the learner-centered principles that you're ransacking

your course designs for? Do a web search for "student centered learning"; "learner centered instruction"; "learner-centered assessment" (or "student-centered assessment"); "learner centered teaching"; and so on. Good luck and have fun.

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