

## Learning-Centered Learning: A Mindset Shift for Educators

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### Abstract

The author presents philosophical learning assumptions that support the construct of learning-centered learning. This 21st-century construct supports learning environments that create intrinsic motivation, accommodate individual learning-style characteristics, give increased control to individual learners, and see all learning as multidimensional.

American educators have a mindset about learners and the learning process. Although all educators do not have the same mindset, many see teaching in terms of controlling: what students learn, how they learn, and how the learning is measured. This mindset focusing on teaching – rather than on learners and the learning process – seems to be fairly common among American educators of today.

Here, at the start of the 21st-century, we educators are being urged to rethink how we look at learning and teaching. We are being asked to shift our thinking and our philosophical mindset to what I call learning-centered learning (Reynolds, 2005), to emphasize the learner and the learning process. This rethinking has had a long history in the ebb and flow of educational philosophy in the United States, but it was during the mid-1990s that an interest in learner-centered and learning-centered strategies was rekindled by an article in *Change* by Barr and Tagg (1995). In that article, they suggest we shift our mindset to rethink how we see learners and more importantly, how we as educators can impact the learning environment.

By looking at five learning assumptions, we can identify some changes in our mindset that will help us to implement a true learning-centered learning construct.

### Learning Is Fun

The construct of learning-centered learning supports learning environments where learning is viewed as a lifelong process and a natural, developmental process that has value for its own sake. Learning is seen as multidimensional, and therefore affects the learners' cognitive, emotional, and physical being. Learning is an enjoyable and productive learning activity (Reynolds, 2005).

A number of elements make up the mindset shifts needed by educators to embrace this learning assumption. One focuses on the idea that learning is an enjoyable and productive human activity. Some educators seem to emphasize that learning is "hard work," an attitude which may produce anxiety and pressure on learners. P.A. Trout remarks, "Higher education is not supposed to be Club Med or a New Age seminar. Learning (and teaching!) entails frustration, anxiety, disappointment, shame, pressure, sweat and tears" (1997, p. 29). These or similar philosophical sentiments have been expressed by other educators and may even be part of our own mindset. Is learning a process of anxiety, shame and pressure, or is it a natural human process of self-direction and self-control that is stimulating and enjoyable? I think it is the latter.

We can define our species as the "learning species." Our survival through the ages has relied on our ability to learn and adapt to changing environments. Has all this learning been produced by pressure on humans to learn, or is learning more of an aspect of our human makeup and survival strategies? We all know hobbyists who spend hours on end working and learning to improve or develop their hobby. To the outsider, this effort of a hobbyist might be viewed as hard work, but to the hobbyist it is very enjoyable. One can see similar activities from those that are sometimes called workaholics, but I think only a few of these *workaholics* see their efforts as hard work.

Ronald Gross has described a state of learning that may account for this type of human experience, the feeling of becoming engrossed in what one is doing. Gross (1991) calls this state of learning "flow": "In flow experiences, intense concentration on what is relevant develops the ability to merge unselfconscious action with awareness and to alter the experience of time" (p. 54). The enjoyment of being lost in one's own learning activity can be a rewarding experience, but one of the problems may

be that so few educators have had these learning experiences in their own lives. Other factors that contribute to the fun of learning is the learner's control over the learning process and the influence of intrinsic motivation (both of which are addressed later in this article).

Others have embraced the philosophical assumption that learning can, and should be, fun. R. Schank (2000) writes, "Contrary to what the schools would have you believe, learning should be fun" (p. 13). Schank conveys the essence of the joy of learning when writing about students being smart: "It's about falling in love with a subject and being intellectually curious about it" (p. 40). The idea that learning is a natural and enjoyable human endeavor is also supported by Andrew Lippman from the famed Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Laboratory. In a 2002 interview, Lippman remarked:

The point is that learning is a natural activity that takes root when you do it yourself and when there is an emotional reason to be attached to the knowledge. Whether this is "student-centered" or the result of an inspired lecturer is less important than engendering the notion that learning is contagious, natural and fun. (p. 12)

The mindset that learning can and should be fun is a philosophical shift for educators. One way to enhance this shift is for us to think about our past learning experiences and identify those that were enjoyable. I am confident that many of us have had those learning experiences.

### **Controlling and Directing One's Own Learning**

The construct of learning-centered learning supports learning environments where understanding, controlling, and directing one's own learning is essential for becoming a lifelong learner. Learners are given ever-increasing opportunities to expand their control and responsibility over what is learned, how it is learned, and how the learning is measured (Reynolds, 2005).

One of the hardest philosophical shifts in the mindset of educators is to accept the learning assumption that learners need to be given these increased kinds of control. This article cannot address all the facets related to how learners should be given more control over the learning process. Here, I would like to concentrate on the measurement of learning outcomes and how educators might give learners more control over this area.

Many of us educators may accept the assumption that learners have different learning-style characteristics, so we may already see the need for varying learning strategies to accommodate different learning styles. Educators are generally less likely to see the need to vary how learning is measured. For example, many of us use essay exams in courses for which we are not measuring writing skills, which automatically gives good writers an advantage over poor writers and thereby negates the true measure of a learner's knowledge or skills.

In learning-centered learning environments, learners are offered a number of ways to measure their learning. Learners can be offered a number of assessment choices, such as multiple choice exams, essay exams, research papers, or portfolios, to mention just a few. A good example of a learning-centered learning measurement tool would be the use of "science-fair" types of projects. These projects are generally associated with science courses but certainly could be structured to work with other subjects. The "science-fair" types of projects allow the learner to select a topic of inquiry, decide the learning strategy to use, and then create a way to demonstrate or display the results of the learning outcome. In other words, the learner selects what is to be learned, how it is to be learned, and most importantly, how the learning is to be measured, which are key elements to an effective learning environment.

I have made the argument (Reynolds, 2005) that a good example of a learning-centered learning environment is working on one's doctoral dissertation. A doctoral dissertation can be viewed as a major "science-fair" type of learning project. When pursuing a dissertation, the learner is required to select a topic (research area) to be investigated (what is to be learned); complete the research on the topic (how it is learned); and, then present the results of the research (how the learning is measured). It does seem sad that learners need to reach this level of education to experience learning-centered learning.

The American Psychological Association (APA) has identified 14 learner-centered psychological principles. The APA Report (1997) states that "successful learners are active, goal-directed, self-regulating, and assume personal responsibility for contributing to their own learning" (p. 7). For learners to start to control and direct their own learning, they will need opportunities to do so. We can start to offer these opportunities by shifting our mindset.

### **Learning-style Characteristics**

The construct of learning-centered learning supports learning environments where an attempt is made to build on the strengths, interests, and needs of individual learners. Accommodations are made for the diversity of individual learning-style characteristics and the diversity of learning environments (Reynolds, 2005).

Most educators accept the assumption that learners exhibit different learning needs or have different learning-style

characteristics, so the mindset change needed here is primarily one of “theory into practice.” Individual learning preferences can be defined as a pattern of unique personality and environmental characteristics. Learning-style characteristics can be categorized in a number of ways. They may be identified as falling into three domains: cognitive, affective, and physiological. I use the following six categories: perceptual preferences, physical environmental needs, social environmental preferences, cognitive styles, time of day, and motivation (Reynolds, 2005).

What is the philosophical mindset shift that is needed to implement the construct of learning-style characteristics? The rethinking of how to help learners better understand and use their own learning preferences would go a long way in support of this construct. Dr. Stu Werner and I have identified a three-stage model to help learners identify and use information about their learning-style characteristics. The three-stage developmental model (Reynolds & Werner, 2003) asks learners to first identify their learning-style characteristics; next to understand their current effective or ineffective learning strategies; and, then to construct new learning strategies that incorporate their own learning-style characteristics. The awareness of one’s own unique pattern of learning-style characteristics can be a great help in developing more effective learning strategies.

Another “theory into practice” strategy that can shift the mindset of educators is for us to make the construct of learning-style characteristics overt to our students. We can talk with them individually about how each student can better understand her or his own learning-style characteristics. Even a general discussion about learning-styles can help students start to think and understand how their current learning strategies may or may not be supporting their own learning needs. Also, students can independently investigate the construct of learning-style characteristics and use that information to develop more productive learning strategies for themselves.

### Learning Motivation

The construct of learning-centered learning supports learning environments with a learning culture, where the emphasis is on developing the learner’s intrinsic motivation to learn and producing a lifelong desire to “learn about learning” (Reynolds, 2005).

Many educators accept the use of rewards, as seen in grades, to promote motivation. This assumption about extrinsic (external) motivation is so prevalent in most educational environments (K-higher education) that it is considered the norm. The changes needed here are the recognition that extrinsic motivational strategies may do more harm than good and a mindset shift toward more acceptance of the value of intrinsic motivation.

Alfie Kohn is a popular writer who addresses educational topics as well as other social issues. Kohn (1993) writes about the issue of motivation in his book *Punished by Rewards*. He suggested that extrinsic rewards, such as grades, stars, etc., can reduce the intrinsic motivation that we want learners to develop. Kohn (1993) writes:

The use of rewards for reading, writing, drawing, acting responsibly and generously, and so on is cause for concern, not only because these things could be intrinsically motivating but because we want to encourage rather than extinguish that motivation. Extrinsic motivators are most dangerous when offered for something we want children to want to do. (p. 87)

Researchers (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999; Vansteenkiste & Deci, 2003) have documented the negative effect on intrinsic motivation that can be caused by external rewards (extrinsic motivation). The impact of using external rewards is a serious concern, say Deci, Koestner & Ryan (1999): “When institutions—families, schools, businesses, and athletic teams, for example—focus on the short-term and opt for controlling people’s behavior, they may be having a substantially negative long-term effect” (p. 659).

The mindset shift required to produce a culture of intrinsic motivation to replace external rewards is not going to be easy for most educators. One strategy that might be used in our current educational system is to shift gradually away from using external rewards and toward learning assumptions that nurture intrinsic motivation. One of the key elements that would impact the creation of more intrinsic motivation is to change how learning is measured. I have outlined earlier that “science-fair” types of projects allow learners more control over how their learning is measured. Other measurement tools, such as student-prepared portfolios, research papers, and criterion-referenced exams, would start to create a culture where intrinsic motivation could develop.

The mindset shift in regard to developing learning environments that promote intrinsic motivation is not going to be easy for some educators. This is truly a philosophical shift that is based on the learning assumption that individual learners need more control over what is learned, how it is learned, and how the learning is measured.

### Learning Resources

The construct of learning-centered learning also supports learning environments in which other learners, teachers, family members, community people, employers, and others are seen as learning resources. The tools of technology are used effectively to produce information literacy for each learner (Reynolds, 2005).

Many educators today use a wide-range of learning resources. Generally, educators might agree that effective learning relies on multiple learning resources and the ability to access and evaluate those resources. So the shift in the educators' mindset about learning resources may be concerned with who should select and control those resources.

The construct of learning-centered learning requires that learners be given increasing opportunities to expand their control and responsibility for their own learning. This control should also include the selection and evaluation of learning resources. The way that learning resources are being offered to students is changing. For instance, we see textbook publishers changing the way they offer books. Textbooks of the future may only be offered as online text, with expanded support material, such as video clips, study guides, and searchable databases. Yet, even with this expanded availability of how learning resources are offered, learners still may not have the opportunity to accept and evaluate their own learning resources. The mindset shift needed here is to recognize the need for learners to expand their control over the selection and use of their own learning resources.

Students may also use other people, such as other learners, family members, teachers, and subject experts, as learning resources. The term collaborative learning is generally used to describe learning that occurs when a learner interacts with other people to meet a common learning goal. Using others to facilitate the learning process is an element of one's own learning-style characteristics. Educators need to keep in mind that not all learners function well with others. The key here is for each learner to be able to decide if other people can help and how others can help in reaching their learning goals.

### Assumptions into Practice

It is difficult to measure the impact certain philosophical constructs may be having on a large, diverse educational system such as ours. We have a public school system with shared local and state controls, and with ever-increasing influence from the federal government. Along with the public system, we have the influence of private schools (some religious-based and others not) and the home-schooling movement. We have a higher education system which is also very diverse with all the complexities associated with that diversity. Community colleges are trying to serve their own communities, while public and private colleges and universities strive to meet the needs of all their stakeholders. To my knowledge, there has not been a widespread drive by any of our educational systems to implement learning-centered learning environments. With this said, there are a few signs that learning-centered learning has been put into practice – on a limited basis.

Several areas of the U.S. educational system are fertile ground for using the construct of learning-centered learning.

*The home-schooling movement* seems to be an area of our current educational system that would be receptive to the construct of learning-centered learning. Even though home-schooling only impacts a very small percentage of K-12 students, it does offer the possibility that parents can create and practice their own learning philosophy. With this freedom to create new and different learning environments, home-schooling offers an opportunity to create learning-centered learning environments.

Kochenderfer and Kanna (2002) write about successful home-schooling and describe 10 different home-schooling styles. One style is called unschooling and is based on the writing of John Holt. The unschooling style can have different meanings for different people. Kochenderfer and Kanna (2002) stress the freedom to learn that is associated with the unschooling style, and that "Unschoolers embrace that freedom and believe strongly that learning happens naturally and effortlessly and they trust in their child's ability to direct their own learning" (p. 47). That freedom to learn is also an integral element of the learning-centered learning construct.

*Public schools* are another likely site for learning-centered learning. There is a current effort by the U.S. Department of Education to initiate reform in the nation's high schools. The current emphasis seems to be to focus on implementing the "No Child Left Behind" law at the high school level (Aspey, 2005). Over the years, some successful reforms have been made to some public high schools. A good example is the H-B Woodlawn Secondary School in Arlington, Virginia. The school was started in the early 1970s as an alternative to the traditional high schools. Bahrampour (2005) notes that most of the decisions made at the school are made by committees on which some members are students. At this school, students create new classes, are free from hall passes, and are permitted to call everyone, including teachers and staff, by their first names. This public high school – that gives much of the control and responsibility of the learning environment to its students – was also ranked number five in *Newsweek's* 100 Best High Schools in the country for 2005. Giving learners the freedom to control their own learning environments is what learning-centered learning is all about.

*Community colleges* offer one of the best opportunities for this learning change. The League for Innovation in the Community College has been at the forefront in trying to transform community colleges from teaching to learning institutions. Terry O'Banion, past president and chief executive officer of the League, wrote about his concept of a Learning College in his book *A Learning College for the 21st Century* (O'Banion, 1997). One of the six key principles described by O'Banion is that "The Learning College engages learners as full partners in the learning process, with learners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices" (p. 49).

Now for the third year, the League is sponsoring a Learning College Summit. One of the goals of the Summit is to "increase

understanding of the concepts of the Learning College as a framework and inspiration for affecting institutional change to improve student learning, performance and success” (League for Innovation in the Community College, 2005, p. 3). The 2005 Learning College Summit’s program listed sessions with titles such as “A Tool for Developing Learning-Centered Faculty” and “Living and Leading in a Learning-Centered College” (Learning College Summit, 2005). The League’s efforts illustrate the type of reform needed in all community colleges.

## Making the Change

As educators, we must rethink how we view learning. We must make the mindset shifts needed to support learning environments where learning is seen as multidimensional and that accommodate diversity of learning-style characteristics, promote intrinsic motivation, and give each learner expanded control over the learning process.

Why is this change so important? Community colleges will continue to face a number of challenges as we move through the 21st-century. One challenge is to assist students to become effective lifelong learners. Community colleges will need to focus their attention on learning about learning. The process of lifelong learning is influenced by how we interact with our ongoing life experiences. My hope for the future is that individual learners will obtain the ability to understand, control, and direct their own learning. Community colleges can play a vital role in this pursuit.

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