

The long road to the learner-centered curriculum

Finally the learner finds herself at the center of the learning process. But it was not always that way. Let's take a quick look at the story.

Subject Centered Era

Once upon a time, in an age when few books were available and teachers were scarce, schools were created to deliver the subject-centered curriculum. This was the era of the 3 Rs: Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic. Students went to school to learn the 3 Rs and teachers went to school to teach the 3 Rs. In this era many teachers were disciplinarians who often tried to beat the curriculum into the learners. Extrinsic motivation, mostly fear-based, was used to induce learning. In this period, most learners were forced to go to school.

Teacher Centered Era

Then, over time, the world became a kinder, gentler place and empowered teachers to teach – teachers were sent to teachers' training colleges. As teachers gained mastery of pedagogy and subject matter content, the era of the teacher-centered curriculum was ushered in. Teachers were in charge and schools focused on helping teachers be successful.

Although it was thought that successful teachers would create successful learners; there was a gap. In the era of the teacher-centered curriculum, teachers could cover the material and “feel good” about themselves, although the students did not learn what was taught. This still happens every day in classrooms where teachers teach new content, attitudes and skills without knowing their students' readiness and prior knowledge preparedness for the new content, attitudes and skills training.

Need for continuous assessment that provides feedback to the learners

To prevent the occurrence of situations where teachers work diligently but students still do not learn, teachers need to be proficient at using accurate assessment to provide a feedback loop regarding what their students have mastered and what they have not. This type of assessment is formative assessment, and provides feedback in a timely manner to the principal participants in the learning activity – teachers, and more importantly students. The purpose of formative assessment is very different from summative assessments given at the end of a program of study whose results are used for placement and accountability decisions.

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Dawn of the Learner Centered Era

As the world evolved, new measurement theory was being developed (1950s and 1960s) and a technological revolution was taking place (1950s - today). New theory and new tools make it more manageable for teachers to teach large classes in smaller groups with a common need for information, or as individuals with unique learning needs. Individualized instruction, self-paced learning and differentiated instruction are now widely used phrases.

Accompanying the developments in technology, were paradigm shifts in education – for example educators, psychologists, parents and students gained more say in educational politics and policy. Thus, more than twenty years ago, the constructivist movement began moving schools internationally, yes even in Trinidad, towards learner-centered curricula.

Figure 1: Focus of the curriculum



When the curriculum is learner centered, if the student has not learned, the student gets additional opportunities to learn. When the curriculum is learner centered, if the teacher reteaches a topic, she uses a pedagogical approach that is different from the one that did not work the first time. For example, if a deductive reasoning approach did not work with these students the first time; she tries an inductive reasoning approach the next time. Individualized instruction, tailored testing, and individual education plans that focus is on the INDIVIDUAL learner are tools progressive teachers use to put the learner centered curriculum into practice.

Only after mastery of the current lesson has occurred, is the learner encouraged move to the next module in the learning plan. In this way, teachers ensure that a solid foundation of appropriate building blocks are put in place to facilitate future learning.

Preparing teachers for classrooms of the 21st Century

In the future, for the individualization of instruction to take place internationally, technological advances must reach the classroom and both TEACHERS and learners must be adept at using these tools to facilitate the learning process. What is currently taught in Teachers' Colleges needs to change to accommodate generation *i* (those humans born after the advent of the internet).

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In the 21st Century, learners will be empowered to learn, and both teachers and technology (teachnology) will facilitate learning with constructive feedback loops. Formative assessment will rise to the fore and take its rightful place in the assessment landscape. Learners will learn what they want to learn, when they want to learn it and will stay engaged for as long as they choose. In this context, learners will not be forced to go to school, to sit in a boring classroom, or be subjected to the whims and fancies of an uninspiring or a demeaning adult.

Instead schools will evolve to keep pace with the learning needs of the new members of the human race. Knowing information will be important. Knowing where to find information will be more important. However, being able to apply, analyze, evaluate and create will continue to be most important skills learners can acquire and use for the benefit of self and society.

About the author:

Dennison S. Bhola, Ph.D. is an educator with over twenty five years of experience. During this time he has facilitated learning for students in high school, college and graduate school. His passion is to help learners learn more efficiently. To this end he conducts research, facilitates workshops and designs educational software. For more information visit www.alts.com.