

GROWTH IN LEARNER-CENTERED PEDAGOGY¹

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My advocacy is teachers' continuing professional growth, the practice and beliefs of which must be constantly fine-tuned with the school's philosophy. One must purposely get out of the comfort zone to get a more philosophical view. I teach in a learner-centered school, which puts the learner at the center of the educative process. Some pedagogical techniques are recognized as more learner-centered than others, but other methods could be transformed as well. It helps to consult literatures on how to grow more learner-centered. In this article, I share how I used McCombs and Miller's attributes of learner-centered leaders and best teachers, and Blumberg's model for transitioning to learner-centered instruction. I realize that I have yet to improve on sharing the responsibility in learning with my students. I anticipate pleasure and pain in shifting my beliefs on the boundary between teacher and students. The exercise demonstrates that the learner-centered mindset compels planning and adapting; preparing the classroom, lessons and instruction; and seeking new information and technology, all for making a teaching moment more helpful to each learner. For this reason, the learner-centered pedagogy contributes not only to the learner's growth but also to the teacher's growth in his or her own pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Plato was among the first ones to note there is more pleasure than pain in acquiring knowledge (James Warren 2014). This may be why I seek it. As a philosopher and educator, I consider continuous learning as a never-ending rational quest. This is particularly so in pedagogy, where I always find room for perfection. Peter Kahn and Lorraine Walsh (2006, 1) also observed that "As university teachers we are also learners, and the process of learning about our teaching is a never-ending story of inspiration, ideas and action."

I teach fulltime in De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB), which is a learner-centered school. The learner-centered pedagogy expounds that effective teaching is more than just transferring knowledge to the students or learners. Effective teaching requires that the teacher creates a meaningful teaching relationship with the learners, and enables

them to grow as persons. The approach starts with what is known about the individual learners, the learning process, and then applying both knowledge to improve teaching. The learner is made the center, rather than the passive recipient of learning.

After more than two decades of teaching in the school, what more can I do to become fully and completely learner-centered? Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" comes to my mind. I can relate to Plato's image of the cave dwellers. My desire to improve on my craft can be genuine, and yet, my confinement can prevent me from seeing the light. My work has become my comfort cave. Jostein Gaarder's retelling of the myth in *Sophie's World* (1998, 76) paints a vivid image:

Imagine some people living in an underground cave. They sit with their backs to the mouth of the cave with their hands and feet bound in such a way that they can only look at the back wall of the cave. Behind them is a high-wall, and behind that wall pass human-like creatures, holding up various figures above the top of the wall. Because there is a fire behind these figures, they cast flickering shadows on the back wall of the cave. So, the only thing the cave dwellers can see is this shadow play. They have been sitting in this position since they were born, so they think these shadows are all there are.

As a cave dweller, I can simply continue what I do best, or venture out of my cave and dare to look at it from a wider point of view. I decide against comfort. To seek enlightenment necessitates going out of my comfort cave.

To identify priority areas of improvement in my practice, I make a practical and thorough self-assessment using the mixed research approach (John Creswell, 2014, 2008). This article draws more from the qualitative component of my exercise, the preliminary form of which is my own narrative study of the practice (Creswell, 2013). Geoffrey E. Mills' 3Es (2014) guides my data collection activities, which I describe as follows: *Experiencing*, by using my observations, reflections and previous studies undertaken in my classes; *Examining*, by using archival documents on my performance as a teacher; and *Enquiring*. I review my practice and identify priority areas for exploration aided by books offering alternative approaches to evaluating and improving learner-centered practices. My analysis and conclusion are aided by insights I gather from philosophical lectures and interactions with colleagues. Altogether, they keep me "disturbed" and connected with the rest of the world.

I should emphasize that for growth in the art and craft of teaching, one must use systematic self-assessment tactics.² Self-examination results are enriched and sharpened when supplemented by empirical data, external validation, and other models for self-assessment that promote better teaching. My deliberations are always informed by historical data, personal experience and observations, and secondary literature on learner-centered pedagogy of education. The intent of my probing is closely mirrored by Phyllis Blumberg's "Model of Better Teaching to Increase Learning" (2014, x). The process must start with the desire to teach better, which will push one to develop and use effective teaching strategies.

THE TEACHING PRACTICE

Some pedagogical techniques are recognized as more learner-centered than others,

but based on my experience, other methods could be transformed as well. The lecture method is one of the more widely used, but also more widely criticized teaching methods, especially among the early advocates of learner-centered instruction. Traditional lecture is labelled as boring or not conducive to learning because there is very little exchange of ideas between the teacher and students. Some teachers avoid it, still, I embrace it as my primary teaching method.

To be learner-centered, one must remain a learner. Barbara L. McCombs and Lynda Miller (2007, 7) observed that "...effective teachers know how to flexibly shift their role from teacher to expert learner to beginning learner." This is exactly the demand as one continually responds to the challenge at work. But I realize that I cannot give what I do not have. I am a product of the lecture method. Lecture is practically the only teaching method I knew. I had to make it work in DLS-CSB. To minimize the disadvantages of lecturing, I transformed my lectures into face-to-face sharing of knowledge and information. I modified my approach from pure straight lecture, first, into a more relaxed or casual lecture, then to the *interactive lecture* which became the core of my learner-centered practice. I lectured to facilitate student learning, using it as a means for initiating student interest and insights. It proved useful as trigger input prior to developing, discovering, or tapping the potential of the students in dialogues encouraging critical thinking.

While lecture is my main content delivery technique, I engage the learners actively in my classes. After each lecture, I employ a mixture of teaching methods with the use of the best available technology, given my knowledge and skills as a teacher. My classes demonstrate an *interactive and dynamic learning* approach since I give the students a wide opportunity to actively participate in the discussion. In Socratic fashion, they take turns in talking and getting into dialogue with me or with one another.

I also observe Aristotle's lessons in rhetoric as I seriously consider emotion (*pathos*) (James A. Herrick, 2013, 109) in the students' initial interest and level of appreciation on the subject and then try to connect the topic to their experience and understanding through the *interactive* part of the lecture. Continuous adaptation in the emphasis and delivery of my lecture to the personality of each class makes the learners more responsive.

The term *interactive or participatory* is used to describe my classroom learning activities akin to the way Peter Frederick, as cited by Elisa Lynn Carbone (1998), refers to as *interactive or participatory lecture* when he suggests involving students in large lectures. Kate Exley and Red Dennick (2004) also describe *interactive lectures* as an *active learning* approach.

In effect, interactive lecture is learner-centered. As argued by an educational developer: "Learning is about students and helping them enter the joy of the subject you teach; this means that you have to enthuse and intrigue the students, so that they want to carry on studying the subject, and want to know more about it. The main emphasis in lecturing is on which they have drawn largely from John Dewey:

The pragmatists' model of the teacher calls for an exceptionally competent person – one who possesses breadth and depth of knowledge, understands current conditions that affect the lives of students, knows how to organize and direct student investigations, understands psychological development and

learning theory, provides a supportive environment in which students can learn, and possesses a refined understanding of school and community resources that are available for teaching and learning.

REGULAR ASSESSMENTS

Growth-seeking teachers must view performance assessments as a help rather than a threat to their practice. Regular assessments are the most available means of getting objective feedback. In DLS-CSB, the evaluation tools were designed to assess our teaching effectiveness in the classroom and measure our learner-centeredness as well. In my case, while I am glad that my students and peers report effectiveness and learner-centeredness, they are not that instructive on how specifically I can grow more learner-centered in teaching. Still, I can use the evaluation framework as my guide in evaluating myself and seeking growth in areas where I need improvement.

School evaluations are more helpful when the framework is stable, results are openly accessible, and the factors of evaluation are known. Our school's tools were structured following Charlotte Danielson's teaching performance assessment framework. Danielson (2007, 2010) contends that classroom teaching is a most complex, challenging, and demanding job. As a craft and an art, it can be daunting in its details, subtlety, and nuancing. Picturing the mandate of schools to that of a producer of graduates who could successfully navigate a complex world, she considers teaching as an essential work. No amount of preparation can completely prepare teachers for all there is to know. Learning to teach is therefore constantly needing perfecting. Henceforth, teachers learn best by applying clear standards of practice as they engage in active learning in these four (4) components of the profession: *1) planning and preparation; 2) classroom environment; 3) instruction; and, 4) professional responsibility*. I find these four (4) components of the evaluation framework very helpful by way of its comprehensiveness. While components 1, 2 and 3 cover the day-to-day or short-term concerns, component 4 calls attention to an ongoing and long-term need of a teacher to grow as a credible agent.

Teaching, as it involves rhetoric, following Aristotle's precepts, is more of a craft rather than a science. To flourish, one would be guided not by a how-to book, but by learning from theories and practices that could best instruct a teacher on the objectives or purpose of the craft. All activities should always be teleological or end-result oriented (Christopher Shields, 2007). In the case of learner-centered pedagogy, one purpose could be improving teaching and learning to involve learners. A personal expression of which could be "to be the best learner-centered teacher as I can be."

ADVANCING LEARNER-CENTERED PARAMETERS

Continuous documentation and critical-examination, supplemented by relevant literature, are needed to maintain a growth-oriented outlook on one's teaching approach. For this exercise, I chose two guide posts in my exploratory enquiry, namely: McCombs and Miller's *attributes of learner-centered leaders and best teachers*, and Blumberg's *model for transitioning to learner-centered instruction*.

McCombs and Miller prepared a synthesis of related researches describing learner-centered leaders and summarized them into a set of qualities. They noted commonalities in said qualities with those attributes others identified in the best teachers. Accordingly, learner-centered leaders and the best teachers: 1) are highly reflective; 2) believe they can make a difference with all kinds of learners; 3) see teaching and learning as a partnership between teachers and their students; 4) believe students should have choices and be responsible for their own learning; 5) care about students and making a difference in their learning process and progress; 6) are passionate about the work they are doing; and, 7) are experts in their fields of study (2009, 42-46).

I almost live up to this set of standards, except on the fourth item, which says that *teachers should provide choices and share responsibilities with the students*. I provide various activities to respond to their diverse learning styles and tap their varied talents and interests, but students are not given alternative activities to choose from. I even administer profiling activities to update myself on their learning orientation and philosophy of education.³ Still, the whole class works together in all activities. “One for all, all for one” and “No one should be left behind” are the mottos. I maintain control of the classroom and assume full responsibility in realizing learner-centered education. As the teacher, I embody the core and I need to facilitate the process of education. I take my dedication and creativity as keys to the success of the learning process.

Maryellen Weimer’s foreword in Phyllis Blumberg’s *Developing Learner-Centered Teaching* (2009) typifies the mind-set that I follow. While acknowledging the growing openness to learner-centered teaching, she observed that most teachers simply do not know how to design or implement strategies that make students more responsible for their learning. I am one of those teachers. I find it most dis-orienting to step aside and entrust students with the learning responsibility.

I tried Phyllis Blumberg’s detailed tools to supplement or confirm this troubling initial view. In her 2009 book, she expounds on transitioning from instructor-centered to learner-centered teaching in five dimensions,⁴ namely: 1) the function of content; 2) the role of the instructor; 3) the responsibility for learning; 4) the purposes and processes of assessment; and, 5) the balance of power. To categorize my practice, I had to consider each of the five dimensions in turn.

Blumberg’s transitioning rubrics is quite detailed and rigorous. In the function of content dimension alone, one has to consider four (4) components, to wit: varied uses of content, level to which students engage in content, use of organizing schemes, and use of content to facilitate future learning. I applied Blumberg’s tabular presentation that described how an instructor can transition considering *the level to which students engage in content*. What I did was to indicate (by *italicizing*) which of the columnar descriptions closely describe my current teaching practice. The result is a visual representation of where I stand in the transitioning map continuum.

As shown in the table below, I am in the higher level of transitioning with respect to engaging students on the content, as I provide wide opportunities for students to discuss and reflect on selected topics.

Blumberg's Rubric for the Function of Content Dimension: Guide to Incremental Transitioning from Instructor-Centered to Learner-Centered Teaching (2009, 74)				
Example Component	Employs instructor-centered approaches →	Transitioning to learner-centered approaches →		Employs learner-centered approaches
		Lower level of transitioning →	Higher level of transitioning	
Level to which students engage in content	Instructor allows students to memorize content	Instructor provides content so students can learn materials as given to them without transforming or reflecting on it.	<i>Instructor assists students to transform and reflect on some of the content to make their own meaning out of some of it.</i>	Instructor encourages students to transform and reflect on most of the content to make their own meaning out of it.

Observing the same procedure, I looked next on the dimension of the role of the teacher, especially in my choice of teaching and learning methods appropriate for student learning goals. There, I am in higher level of transitioning as well. As an instructor, I observe the symbolic “meeting half-way” or “stepping down” as my way of communicating that the achievement of class learning goals takes into consideration the student’s point of departure. The responsibility for learning still rests mostly on me as the instructor. Although I verbally encourage them to be responsible for their own learning, most exercises are done and supervised in class, and I determine what will be covered on examinations. I just do not expect students to learn much on their own and be responsible for exploring their lessons independently. In this regard, I am still at the lower level of transitioning. I value assessment within the learning process and put less emphasis on assessment processes that do not promote active learning. In this regard, I fall under the higher transitioning level with respect to the purposes and processes of assessment. Again, it is with respect to balance of power, where I find myself mostly instructor-centered. Because I have reservations on the viability of entrusting the learners with full responsibility on their learning, I still maintain full control of policies and deadlines.

Thus, applying Blumberg’s rubrics (2009), I identify myself with either the lower or higher level of transitioning to learner-centered teaching in most dimensions. But, in the balance of power, I am still instructor-centered. Obviously, I am still far from being the complete learner-centered practitioner. Taken together, the two guides outlined for me a large space for exploration in the interest of developing my teaching practice. To further my transitioning from instructor-centered to learner-centered approaches, I must start improving on the balance of power, increase the students’ responsibility for their learning, and give them more choices.

To those who wish to become learner-centered, Barbara L. McCombs and Jo Sue Whisler (1997) strongly recommend checking one’s beliefs and assumptions about learners, learning and teaching. One demonstrative tool, the *Teacher Beliefs Survey* (in the book’s Appendix A) contain 35-item questionnaire checks on three (3) factors: *Factor 1* – learner-centered beliefs about learners, learning and teaching; *Factor 2* – non-learner-centered beliefs about learners; and *Factor 3* – non-learner-centered beliefs about learning and teaching. I took the challenge of taking the survey. My result showed that while on one hand I am strongly learner-centered based on factors 1 and 2, on the other hand, I hold also strong non-learner-centered beliefs about learning and teaching (factor 3).

THE GROWING CHALLENGE

Deducing from the observations I gathered, I am challenged to make a paradigm shift and to practice greater democracy in my classes. I must trust democracy in the teaching and learning process. Rather than control, I need to shift to inspiring students' learning. I must unlearn those strong non-learner-centered beliefs about learning and teaching. This is the thrust that would bring my classroom practice to a higher level. I can start with developing methodologies that provide choices, and sharing responsibilities with the learners with respect to course content and activities. The theme of freedom of choice for students will have to be observed as I continue to engage them in philosophical mindfulness. I will move them to accept the challenge of engaging themselves in active learning for them to join in the living continuation of Socrates' *elenctic mission*. Taking from Charles H. Kahn's appraisal of Plato (1998), it is a learner's moral responsibility to acknowledge one's lack of wisdom towards the betterment of one's soul. Once out of intellectual lethargy, I can lead them to the knowledge of the good. For indeed, genuine enlightenment only comes from one's grasp of fundamental realities, which in turn can only come out after going through an arduous training.

Recently, DLS-CSB has widened and deepened its learner-centeredness by reflecting in its vision-mission statement the philosophy of inclusion and innovation. The philosophy of inclusive education compels regular teachers to address the needs of diverse learners including those with special needs. Jeffrey M. Centeno (2012), expounded on the inclusive philosophy of education being a fundamental condition of social transformation. Rolando M. Gripaldo (2012) added that the principle of inclusion disposes of marginalization as it promotes cultural pluralism. By emphasizing the social dimensions of learning and living together, it transforms education into an inclusive system. And, considering the evolving state of society, both thought it wise and necessary to reflect the inclusion principle in the philosophy or policy of educational institutions. Our school is at the forefront of this movement, by making its courses accessible to the poor and diversely-gifted learners. To be truly part of this direction, I must persist in pursuing my new thrust, that of sharing power and responsibility in the classroom.

In the process of pushing for such changes, I can meaningfully participate in discussions confirming or denying the truisms in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Epicureans's assertions on how pleasurable and painful learning pursuits (Warren 2014) can be in our times. In anticipation of the changes that I need to bring to my teaching practice, I go back to the myth. In Gaarder's (1998, 77) story:

The joyful cave dweller could now have gone skipping away into the countryside, delighting in his new-found freedom. But instead he thinks of all the others who are still down in the cave. He goes back. Once there, he tries to convince the cave dwellers that the shadows on the cave wall are but flickering reflections of the "real" things. But they don't believe him. They point to the cave wall and say that what they see is all there is. Finally, they kill him.

Towards moving to one's ideal learner-centered pedagogy, explorations could fail and cause performance evaluations to go down. Such difficulties could be anticipated.

Beyond fearing failure, one must persist in change. The process of unlearning some teaching habits and applying new ideas can be daunting. And this is when some struggle can be expected. When new designs do not work immediately, one must be ready to put in additional re-thinking and re-designing of modules. Because it takes time and dedication to master the desired changes, most authors recommend incremental changes rather than a major overhaul of one's approach. Sharon L. Silverman and Martha E. Casazza (2000) warned of the complexities that may block an educator's plan of effecting developmental changes. To prepare for the task, they find it necessary to evolve into a teacher as innovator, researcher and change agent. The changed outlook will also require collaborating with colleagues on such tasks as confirming or critiquing the changes in action. Blumberg's more recent work (2014) could be a handy reference in assessing teaching towards promoting "deep and intentional learning." She developed a menu for teachers in a variety of circumstances. At any level, from introducing small changes to refining techniques, one can choose a suitable assessment guide in the path of perfecting one's pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

The learner-centered pedagogy provides a clearly defined picture which a teacher could aspire for. Available learner-centered literature reminds a teacher on the importance of elements comparable to ingredients that makes an effective *rhetoric* as provided by Aristotle. The philosophy emphasizes emotions (*pathos*), by starting from the stand point of the learner or students. But to effectively use the approach, the teacher needs to continually improve in instruction and content (*logos*), as well as build credibility (*ethos*). The intent to be learner-centered or consciously work towards its ideals is the key. Learner-centered teaching strategies, processes or techniques are important, only in so far as they are applied in a manner that moves the learner to get more involved in the process (the end goal). As such, one is not limited in approach. Practically, any teaching method can be improved towards making it learner-centered. The learner-centered mindset necessitates getting out of the cave occasionally. One needs to continually adapt because the learners remain all distinct as well as changing. Likewise, going out of the workplace helps clarify the work context and deepens one's philosophy of work and one's philosophy of education. Going out enriches the *logos* and strengthens the *ethos*. Any teacher from any school could grow in pedagogy by becoming learner-centered or by adopting an educational philosophy that clearly defines the end-goal.

NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper which was read on 23 September 2017, during the Philippine National Philosophical Research Society (PNPRS) Lecture Series 2017: In memoriam: Dr. Rolando M. Gripaldo+ at Jade Vine Restaurant and Executive Inn, 537 UN Ave. cor. Jorge Bocobo St., Ermita, Manila, Philippines.

2. In "Teaching logic: An examination of a classroom practice," which was published in *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 18 (2), I demonstrated that critical self-

examination, if conducted systematically and with intellectual honesty, can be a valid and worthwhile exercise among educators.

3. To profile my students, I also administered the Learning Orientation and Philosophy of Education (LOPE) survey. The most recent philosophical survey that I conducted was made in July 2017 (3rd term, SY 2016-17). The survey sample covered more than half of my students and was distributed among the four (4) schools of De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde: School of Design and Arts, School of Diplomacy and Governance, School of Management and Information Technology, and School of Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management. The survey result showed that my students' bias is Pragmatic philosophy. For a comprehensive discussion about the survey, please see my earlier article: Understanding our students: A philosophical perspective. *Learning Edge*, 5.

4. These five dimensions were previously defined by Weimer (2002, 2013) as the five key changes to instructional practice, namely: 1) the role of the teacher; 2) the balance of power; 3) the function of content; 4) the responsibility for learning; and 5) the purpose and processes of assessment.

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