

Creating Learner Centered Environment to Optimize Students' Learning

Prof. Parul Mishra

Amity University Rajasthan, India

pmishra@jpr.amity.edu

Dr Manoj Kumar

Assistant Professor

Amity University Rajasthan, India

mkumar1@jpr.amity.edu

Abstract

Creating a learner centered environment is what an educator can do to optimize the students' learning. Previously the concept was not comfortable to apply for students; most of them were accustomed to teachers centered learning experiences. As students, they rarely had a choice, as what to learn and how to learn? Most of their time they were in conventional environment and pedagogies of learning; there was no difference found in school learning and college/university level learning. As university/ college teachers we should make endeavors to draw a line of difference in the ways conducting learning at college and university level. A learner centered environment is different. It is not that traditional way of taking down notes and passing tests to graduate to another level. It requires students to take on new responsibilities and roles that go far beyond cramming the texts and passing the same. It is an environment that permits them to take some real control over their educational experience and encourage them to make some significant choices about what will they learn and how will they learn. In a learner centered classrooms collaboration is the norm, not an occasional class activity. These changes may seem difficult for the students in the beginning but gradually they would realize that the chief aim of learning is to apply it and execute it, just following the age old traditional pedagogies, or I should say there was no pedagogy used in teaching and learning, it would be a difficult word to explain the system of the past. The situation in the past was that, only one system was followed to make the students learn; reading texts, explaining them, taking tests and evaluating at the end of the year or half. No emphasis was on value added or vocational guidance and its implementation. Therefore, it would not be easy for students to be comfortable with the new environment. It is up to us, their teachers who are suppose to help them understand and guide them to accept the changes offered. It is too unfamiliar and requires too many skills that many students do not possess. The most significant thing is to make the students believe that the changes done are to make their education executive and applicable in all senses. They will have to be explained why teaching has shifted from teacher centered to learner centered. They need to understand that teaching, like all professions, must allow research to improve its practice. They need to see that we are obligated to make changes in how we teach if research shows that those changes will improve our students' opportunities to learn. As a great Victorian poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson quoted, "Old order changeth, yielding place to new...Lest one good custom should corrupt the world" (Morte, D'Arthur). This shift would definitely lead the students to become upgraded graduates leading teachers to be more flexible and accepting the changes.

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Before implementing any changes to the education system teachers should keep in mind that most of the students in India come from a very traditional, teacher centered learning environment. Therefore, to make them profusely understand the new environment of learner centered learning and encourage them to understand why the change has been done to the learning system. No doubt COVID- 19 has led the world to follow the learner centered teaching and learning. The offline is now online which was earlier considered as off-line. Academia is the sector which severely got affected by the COVID situation. Primarily, by now after around a year students and teachers have accepted the online education. The reason why COVID needs a mention here is because it has conspicuously added a technical gem in the crown of education system- Technology which is largely a part of student-centered learning. Now is the time of education 4.0. The technology-based learning has made the learning system easy. A general say that more than 75% of the Indian population uses smart phone, and once you know how to operate it you are master of half of the learning world. Education is no more limited by the time barriers and stressful long hours of exam writing. There are options provided to the learners in the new learning system. The NEP 2020 emphasizes on implementing the new system which is tight but light. It is no more, tight jacketed system which did not permit of choosing streams of interest. It supports online education system, student centered learning, students' involvement in syllabus making, active collaborations. The paper aims to explain the new skills adapted by teachers for a learner centered environment. As faculty members who have adopted learner centered approach to teaching must be willing to assist their students learn this new pedagogical method of learning, which would make their

students become learners. For most of the students the learner centered environment, will prove to be a significant departure from traditional to the 21st century educational environment.

When a profound consideration is been given to a thought of changing teaching system, various questions arise in the mind of teacher and the students as well. Does the new approach be fruitful in making students learn? For instance, a teacher decides that he or she is going to begin using small groups, the teacher needs to consider how much productive the change is going to be. Certain questions need to be answered on priority basis regardless of the research saying that group work will be beneficial for students.

Do they understand the significance of group work?

Do they know how to work together in small groups?

Do they know how to communicate with each other and interact without a teacher's guidance?

Do they understand the importance of each member of group?

This sudden change will disrupt the expectations of schooling that have become hard wired in their brains over the previous 12-16 years. It will change their responsibilities and their roles by asking them to take on many of the functions for which the teacher was responsible. In *Redesigning Higher Education (1994)* Gardiner points out, "that if our students do not understand the learning process-the chief engine of education they are not going to learn very much in our courses no matter what we do. One of the most valuable actions we could take to improve learning – and thus the productivity of both our students and our institutions--would be to teach our students how to learn." This recommendation of Gardiner is of more valid in learner centered environment, where there is a change observed in the traditional

role of students changes dramatically. Learner centered environment claims that learning much more than listening to lectures, taking notes and passing tests.

How does one go about becoming a highly skilled teacher who optimizes students' learning? To quote Barr & Tagg (1995) in *From Teaching to Learning*, they are of view that teachers would be much more effective if, instead of focusing on their teaching, they focused on how and what their students are learning, in other words we need to adopt a learner centered approach to teaching. The first aspect of learner centered teaching that can optimize learning is its focus on involving students in as much first hand learning as possible. Many of the college students believe that much of the work that goes into their learning should be done by the teacher. This is not surprising as this has been their experience for much of the previous education. The students' mantra, "tell me what you want to know I will learn it and give it back to you" is thriving in today's higher education world. But it does not lead to optimized learning. It holds no opportunity for the students to learn. When students engage themselves in first hand learning, they learn to figure out things for themselves. They get an opportunity to analyze their capability of analyzing things on their own, to directly connect them to the world around them, and to learn to use their innate curiosity to discover their power of their own learning abilities (Tarry Doyle)

Another substantial feature of Learner centered teaching environment is teaching them lifelong skills. "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn (Alvin Toffler) This aspect of Learner centered teaching focuses on teaching for long term memory. Most of us as faculty realize that it is not possible for us to teach the students, what we have learnt

ourselves so meticulously, in just 3 hours a week. The chief aim of education should be to make the students able to develop their intellectual tools and think productively.

Learner centered teaching emphasizes on preparing students for their future learning. To optimize this preparation, we need to help our students develop lifelong learning skills, that include the learning how to learn skills and strategies needed to deal with complex and challenging matters they will encounter in their college lives. Below are certain roles and responsibilities which our students need to perform in a learner centered environment. Roles like self tutor, collaboration with others, work in groups, take active part in discovery learning, teach others, evaluate own learning, presentation of the learning in public or open presentation, learn new strategies to develop their skills for long term learning, solve authentic problems, presentation of teacher feedback in for the sake of improvement, take learning risks, practice more, take class notes, listen in class, read text books, write papers, take tests and quizzes, take part in recitation and do homework. All these roles are to be performed by the group members. Responsibilities which a learner centered environment has for the students are: make choices about one's own learning, take control over one's learning, give input to the evaluation/assessment methods of the course. Give suggestions to course rules guidelines, give formative feedback of what they learnt to the peers, evaluate one's self/ performance, spend more time learning outside of the class, work with people outside the university on service projects or other learning activities. If our students are successful in taking up these roles they will need help and guidance from us. They can also ask as to why they are been asked, to perform these duties and roles. Every aspect of our teaching offers us opportunities to

enhance the quality, depth and performance of our students' learning

Conclusion: Job of teacher will not be limited to 8 to 2 or 9 to 5; it will be having no time barriers for teaching and learning. Teachers are no more teachers they are facilitators. Equal responsibility will be specified to students; learner centered classroom students are asked to take on significant roles and responsibilities from those they have previously encountered. These roles and responsibilities are not new to the teaching; they are new to the students. When the same roles and responsibilities are handed over to students in reasonable way, they create the opportunity to optimize students' learning. Not only is the depth of learning enhanced, but by letting our students explore or solve the problem on their own. When students are given activities to do, like discovery learning, collaborative activities we create a genuine opportunity for students to experience a sense of accomplishment and empowerment, as a consequence they develop a greater confidence in their own abilities to learn. The adoption of learner centered teaching approach, seems on the surface, to be something our students would embrace. It will give them more control over their learning, their choices about what to learn and how to learn. Above all firsthand learning and exploratory opportunity to learn this is more interactive. The biggest challenge in establishing learner centered environment will be the students' inclination towards the traditional teacher centered learning environment. It will be quite normal for them to decline from learning new ways after already passing a good time in academics. The reality is that without acceptance there will be only chaos and constant complaining environment in the class. As faculties we need to understand why are the students' resistant to the roles

and responsibilities of learner centered environment. The other helpful thing will be there will be no gap between the tutor and the learner. Teachers will be more like friends; they can share with the students, the research done behind this shifting of environment and the final step to be taken by teachers will be teaching the students new learning skills they will be requiring to be successful in a learner centered classroom.

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