

Book Review

Learner-Centered Teaching: Putting the Research on Learning into Practice

Phyllis Blumberg¹

Citation: Doyle, T. (2011). *Learner-Centered Teaching: Putting the Research on Learning into Practice*, Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Publishers Description: This book presents the research-based case that Learner Centered Teaching (LCT) offers the best means to optimize student learning in college, and offers examples and ideas for putting it into practice, as well the underlying rationale. It also starts from the premise that many faculty are much closer to being learner centered teachers than they think, but don't have the full conceptual understanding of the process to achieve its full impact. There is sometimes a gap between what we would like to achieve in our teaching and the knowledge and strategies needed to make it happen.

LCT keeps all of the good features of a teacher-centered approach and applies them in ways that are in better harmony with how our brains learn. It, for instance, embraces the teacher as expert as well as the appropriate use of lecture, while also offering new, effective ways to replace practices that don't optimizing student learning.

Neuroscience, biology and cognitive science research have made it clear that it is the one who does the work who does the learning. Many faculty do too much of the work for their students, which results in diminished student learning.

To enable faculty to navigate this shift, Terry Doyle presents an LCT-based approach to course design that draws on current brain research on cognition and learning; on addressing the affective concerns of students; on proven approaches to improve student's comprehension and recall; on transitioning from "teller of knowledge" to a "facilitator of learning"; on the design of authentic assessment strategies – such as engaging students in learning experiences that model the real world work they will be asked to do when they graduate; and on successful communication techniques.

The presentation is informed by the questions and concerns raised by faculty from over sixty colleges with whom Terry Doyle has worked; and on the response from an equal number of regional, national and international conferences at which he has presented on topics related to LCT.

Learner-Centered Teaching, like Doyle's previous book *Helping Students Learn in a Learner-Centered Environment*, is filled with many practical suggestions that all faculty can easily adapt. I learned many new ideas on the interpersonal nature of learning centered teaching. I especially liked his strategies for letting our students do the work, using authentic learning and

¹ Phyllis Blumberg is the Director of Teaching and Learning at the University of Sciences in Philadelphia, PA.

assessment tools, using common sense in building relationships with students, ways of sharing power with students, having meaningful discussions, and using instructional patterns. All of these tips are very easy to find as they are often listed in bulleted format or in what he calls figures and listed in the appendix. They are also easy and practical to implement. He lists many practical resources such as examples of authentic learning experiences in higher education and Model Eliciting Activities. Chapter 4, *From Lecturer to Facilitator*, is a great read for faculty who might be resistant to giving up their old teaching methods. It describes many practical, easy to implement ideas for faculty. Carol Dweck's research in this area is so compelling, yet not so well known by faculty in higher education. Doyle does a good job convincing me and I hope other readers that her research has important implications for today's college students and that we can help students to help themselves. The final chapter, *Getting Others to Embrace Learner-Centered Teaching*, outlines important steps that everyone in higher education can benefit from. On the other hand, I was a little disappointed that so much of the book is a repeat from his previous book. However, so much of this is such good advice that it is worth repeating.

This book contains many notable quotes such as:

- "It is a bit ironic that the more 'helpful' a teacher is in terms of giving students answers or solving their problems, the less students actually learn." (page 9)
- "I believe that reflection is the lost art of college teaching." (page 145)

I think the summary chapters where he describes the research base for this book are weak and superficial. Doyle tries so hard to convey the research so that non-cognitive or non-neuroscientists can understand it that too much is lost in translation. Often only conclusions are described, but not enough of the context of the research for the reader to judge if it applies to their situation. The conclusions of the studies on 'hear and see' and 'see and touch and smell' summarized in Chapter 8, *Teaching to all senses* is a good example of this lack of research detail. I question how much some of this research, some of which is based on middle school children, generalizes to higher education populations. If exercise is a key to better academic success, as Doyle proposes, why is the graduation rate of star football or basketball players who do not get drafted to professional teams not 100%? The quality of the research varies from primary literature reported to well respected scientific journals to personal web sites to popular psychology articles in magazines. Some of the research is quite old and there are newer studies that give better insights. The reader does not know if these studies are unique findings or even outliers. Rather than selecting individual research studies it is better to report on trends in research based upon many studies; meta-analyses of literature are good places to look for such research. In fact so little of the book is really supported by solid evidence-based research, that I think a better title would be, *'Putting Experience on Teaching into Practice.'* However, Doyle's experiences are worth reading for most faculty members in higher education.