

## Book Review

# Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice

Anna W.E. Fahraeus<sup>1</sup>

Citation: Weimar, M. (2013) *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 9781118119280.

Publisher description: In this new edition of the classic work, one of the nation's most highly regarded authorities on effective college teaching offers a comprehensive introduction to the topic of learner-centered teaching in the college and university classroom, including the most up-to-date examples of practice in action from a variety of disciplines, an entirely new chapter on the research support for learner-centered approaches, and a more in-depth discussion of how students' developmental issues impact the effectiveness of learner-centered teaching. *Learner-Centered Teaching* shows how to tie teaching and curriculum to the process and objectives of learning rather than to the content delivery alone.

In 1991, Jonathan W. Zophy wrote a short article for the Teachings Innovations column in *Perspectives* where he repeated some of the things he had written about a decade earlier in *The History Teacher*. In his article, he talks about the resistance among faculty in making the move from a teacher-centered approach that views students as passive recipients of knowledge to a learner-centered approach that views students as active learners and classrooms as marked by somewhat chaotic discussions. This idealized view of an egalitarian learning environment that de-emphasizes the role of the teacher and stresses processes over product as students take control over their own learning is, however, only tangentially similar to Maryellen Weimar's (2002) book-length manifesto *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. She presented a method that is much more complex than Zophy's advocacy of a return to Socratic teaching. Where Zophy's work seems today to be idealistic and hard to implement, Weimar's vision seems fairly realistic. She set out a theory and a methodology that targeted the key issues in the classroom that needed to change to make the ideal of creating classrooms that support student self-responsibility and learning more accessible.

One of the central points in Weimar's (2013) revised version of her book, however, is that things have not changed. Teaching is still often focused on what the teacher knows and on unilateral transmission followed by recitation and evaluation rather than on the facilitation of learning (p. 65). She states that classroom observation shows that teachers continue to be lecture-focused even after attending workshops on learner-centered methods (p. 67). So, one of the things she does in the updated book is to ask why teachers are resistant to change in the classroom. Here, her conclusions run surprisingly – or perhaps not so surprisingly – parallel with the same observations made by Zophy (1991): teachers want to show what they know, there is too much content to cover, using new methods is initially awkward and uncomfortable, and stepping out from behind the lectern often increases the teacher's sense of vulnerability because teaching becomes less scripted (pp. 70-71).

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<sup>1</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Halmstad University, Box 823, 301 18 Halmstad, Sweden.  
anna.fahraeus@hh.se.

Weimar then proceeds to set out seven principles that should guide the implementation of learner-centered teaching. Below they are set out with a summary of her clarifications:

1. Teachers let students do more learning tasks, i.e. let them summarize, draw conclusions, pin point difficult areas in the reading, etc.
2. Teachers do less telling, i.e. get better at asking questions.
3. Teachers do instructional design work more carefully, i.e. create more in-class assignments that help students apply cognitive skills to relevant material.
4. Faculty more explicitly model how experts learn, i.e. are willing to share their own learning process and thought process in answering unexpected questions.
5. Faculty encourage students to learn from and with each other (self-explanatory).
6. Faculty and students work to create climates for learning. This is less fuzzy than it sounds. It is about e.g. giving students options so that they accept responsibility for their learning.
7. Faculty use evaluation to promote learning, i.e. use peer assessment and feedback as a point of departure for a discussion.

These principles are linked both to her definition of what learner-centered teaching is and the five key practices that need to change. Her definition is set forth in five points at the beginning of the book: it engages students in learning, i.e. does not allow them to be passive; it motivates them by sharing some of the control over what happens in the classroom and what assignments they do; it encourages collaboration; it includes specific learning skills instruction and promotes student reflection on how and what they learn (p. 15). Getting students to think about what they are reading is something we all want. Each point is, however, interwoven with the others. Getting them to think about what and how they read is connected to getting students to be active since the aim in learner-centered teaching is to make them independent confident learners even outside the classroom (p. 9). In order for this to happen, they need to learn how to reflect on how they learn as well as on what they are learning. In order to do this, they need to learn about cognitive skills. It is a win-win situation if we making learning skills explicit in the classroom. As students come to understand how they learn, it makes learning skills consciously accessible to them. This is Weimar's theory.

The five key practices are well-known and have not changed since the 2002 edition. What has changed is that the implementation chapter 'Making Learner-Centered Teaching Work' has been removed and while some information has been put into individual implementation sections, Weimar has left most of it out in favor of making a plug for her 2010 book *Inspired College Teaching* (Jossey-Bass). For those unfamiliar with her earlier work, the key practices that need to change are: the role of the teacher towards facilitation of learning rather than transmission of knowledge; a shift in the balance of power in the classroom; faculty attitudes towards content; facilitation of increased student responsibility for learning, faculty attitudes towards the purposes and processes of evaluation.

Two of these areas are more provocative and tend to raise more hackles among faculty than the others: the issue of content and the idea of giving students more power. One of the core ideas in Weimar's learner-centered teaching philosophy is that a university education is not only about learning a specific area of expertise. That is important but there is another primary focus: learning to learn. A successful teacher makes herself (or himself) redundant. That's a scary proposition to accept at face value in a time when university administrations are increasing in size and teachers and departments must justify their existence, let alone the need for more funding and more time in the classroom. However, it misses Weimar's point. She is not saying

that students are independent learners but that they need to become more independent and that teachers have the key role in making that happen.

Weimar's manner of presenting why faculty attitudes towards content needs to change is candid but also evidence that she knows about negotiation technique. She begins by acknowledging that, "Coverage does not necessarily equal learning, something most teachers recognize" (p. 115). This is an affirmation. She then makes the observation that most of us have heard or said variations of, "Students may fail to learn or understand what we have covered, but that is their problem – not ours." This is a second affirmation, but then she states boldly, "Less often do we confront ourselves with the fact that when little or no learning results from teaching, teaching serves little or no purpose" (p. 116). This deflates the whole support of the faculty position. What makes it work is that she does not argue that teachers are wrong; it is the responsibility of students to learn. However, she circumvents the traditional question of covering content by advocating a change in attitude toward content based on viewing it as one of wheels on a two-wheeled cart. Both wheels have to function for the student's education to be successful. She states that, "learner-centered teachers opt for those instructional strategies that promote deep and lasting learning" (p. 123). They are willing to cover less in order to ensure that students remember more and know how to apply what they know.

Weimar points out that changing the balance of power in the classroom is central because research does not support education programs where teachers have all the control over what and how students learn. She cites Singham's (2007) article, "Death to the Syllabus" in *Liberal Education*: "a detailed, legalistic syllabus is diametrically opposed to what makes students want to learn. There is vast research literature on the topic of motivation to learn, and one finding screams out loud and clear: controlling environments have been shown consistently to *reduce* people's interest in whatever they are doing" (p. 90). Thankfully, Weimar does not leave the reader to wonder how power can be shared; she sets out clear examples of how to share decisions about activities, assignments, course policy, content, and evaluation. She also highlights that it is not about ceding all control to students. She states openly that that would be detrimental. She admits that it is a difficult issue to decide how much control to give students and that different students may need different amounts of control to feel motivated (p. 109). Even though she has cited research in Chapter Two that states that students do better in terms of grades and are more motivated by being allowed to make some of the decisions, she also says that there is not enough research and that principles and guidelines are needed to "establish professional norms and standards" (p. 109).

Chapter Two is without a doubt the biggest change and addition in this new edition of *Learner-Centered Teaching*. Weimar encourages faculty to read Paul Pintrich's 2003 review in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* of research on motivation because student passivity is a well-known and serious problem and because traditional methods of teaching have now been proven to exacerbate the problem (p. 37). She also recommends two book-length reviews of active learning: Michael Prince's (2004) *Journal of Engineering Education* and Joel Michael's (2006) *Advances in Physiology Education*. She recommends Prince for clarity and his separation of collaborative and cooperative learning from problem-based learning methods. She promotes Michael in part because he focuses on reflective learning and because he distills five principles that support active learning:

1. Learning involves the active construction of meaning
2. Learning facts and learning to do are two different processes—which explains why students can seem to understand but still fail to apply theory

3. Students need practice in extrapolation and transfer of knowledge
4. Learning with others is more effective than learning alone
5. Meaningful learning is facilitated by articulating explanations to one's self, peers, or teachers (pp. 40-41)

As a whole, this chapter is devoted to research about learner-centered methods and the mounting evidence that it has very practical and beneficial effects for students. I have chosen to focus on the reviews Weimar specifically recommends but there are many other studies in the chapter. She begins by stating openly, however, that no comprehensive overview is possible and that the nature of the research is qualitative so no quantitative analyses are possible. She focuses on three main areas of research: deep and surface learning, faculty orientations to teaching, and self-regulated learning. Across the board, the results support a learner-centered approach. The studies have control groups which use traditional methods and the data produced is not anecdotal or based on one or two classes but on much larger groups of students. She looks at research about what makes the methods work (design features), learning outcomes that are affected, reviews how the methods are tested, and the kinds of evidence available. Her point is that research about effectiveness should guide teaching and that it can motivate change if faculty are exposed to the research. This chapter alone is worth the cost of the book.

One other concrete example of the findings in this chapter is the efficacy of three different group structures or methods. These results are significant because most teachers will supplement their lectures with some type of group assignment, and it seems to matter which type is chosen. The research states that PBL or Problem-based learning does not translate into better exams, but it does develop positive attitudes and foster deep learning; i.e., it helps students retain knowledge (pp. 44-45). POGIL or Process-Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning does increase overall scores, the rate of failing students drops, and they do better on exams. It also reduces absenteeism and motivates students to be active in class (p. 45). Peer-Led Team Learning increases grades and the research indicates that students achieve higher results on the same exams that are administered to students taught with more traditional lectures (p. 46).

Anyone who opens Weimar's book will quickly realize that I have not followed her structure in this review. I have instead wanted to highlight some of the key issues that she deals with and the changes she has made to the 2013 edition. The disposition in the book is that she begins by looking at her own journey in becoming a learner-centered teaching advocate. She describes it as a gradual process. Chapter One continues by looking at the theories behind the approach: attribution theory, radical and critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, constructivism and transformative learning. All the theories are significant but as she sets out some of the principles of attribution theory, the reader is reminded that teachers can build self-efficacy in students because it is an acquired rather than an innate ability but that admitting a lack of knowledge is a position of vulnerability which is why comparisons with others should be discouraged and student ability to control some aspects of their learning should be reinforced (p. 17).

The closest Weimar gets to being vague is at the end of Chapter Three when she talks about when and how to intervene. She argues that because it is best to let students arrive at their own conclusions that sometimes teachers need to let them produce poor results. The case in point that she uses is a group assignment where students waste time reading a memo silently and then passing it to the next member in the group. She discusses how she thought about intervening but didn't because she did not want to tell them what they were doing wrong. I disagree with how she handled it but to her credit she does not appear satisfied with it herself either and states

bluntly that she does not have the answers for when and how to intervene (p. 86). She does state that telling students what they are doing wrong might be appropriate occasionally but that it makes them reliant on the teacher. True enough, but I do not think failing to help them see what they are doing wrong is a better option, so perhaps she is right that there is no clear answer, and each teacher has to decide in each situation what is the lesser of two evils.

After the research and the key changes, Chapter Eight deals with 'Implementing the Learner-Centered Approach.' Weimar talks about why and how students and faculty resist non-traditional teaching methods and how to overcome their resistance. The main key is frequent and explicit communication and encouragement as well as asking for feedback but, and this is important, the feedback questions should focus on how they are experiencing their learning rather than on the teacher. This is compelling because university administrations are keen on student evaluations and quality control, but Weimar's work and the research that backs up learner-centered approaches implicitly suggests that it is important that the questions that are asked focus on how students experience the learning process rather than on the teachers as such. Concepts such as self-regulation and choices and their link to student responsibility for learning come back here as foundational principles that mean that teachers need not accept all the criticism as valid. My own experience is that students are surprisingly honest about their own input and its effect on their results. Weimar suggests talking directly to students rather than just eliciting written feedback. She suggests that the appropriate attitude for faculty is to approach their own teaching as a "work in progress, one that you expect will evolve and change over time and in response to student feedback" rather than as something done once and that is being evaluated as a finished product (p. 211). Dealing with faculty resistance is about being armed with knowledge about the research that backs up the methods you choose to use.

Chapter Nine focuses on developmental psychology and its implications for university teaching. Weimar reviews what is known, e.g. that students do not mature at the same pace and that sometimes there are set backs: "Sometimes progress is slow and steady, sometimes there's a growth spurt, and sometimes there's no sign of movement. These variable rates of growth can be seen in individual students as well as in the class a collective entity" (p. 219). Why is this important to know? One of the benefits of considering students in this light consciously is that it supports the idea of sharing power gradually with students. Weimar cites "Teaching Learners to be Self-Directed" by Grow (1991) which describes four stages in young adult growth towards independence:

1. Students are dependent and need explicit instruction and coaching to move forward.
2. Students are interested and begin to set goals for themselves. Teacher enthusiasm is motivating to these students.
3. Students are involved and begin to see themselves as participating in their own learning process. They should be asked for progress reports to support their own goal-setting.
4. Students are self-directed. They can set their own goals and standards that they want to meet.

These stages are recognizable to anyone who has been teaching for a few years and thinking about how students are different and approach learning differently. To connect the differences to developmental psychology supports teacher patience and the need for teachers to plan assignments and activities that take the different stages into account. Weimar discusses the use of a progressive design model in basic tasks, targeting learning skills more systematically, and considering the implications of student developmental psychology of students for overall

curriculum design. At the close of this chapter, which is the final chapter in the book, she addresses faculty who are new to learner-centered approaches. She gives concrete advice: to begin with activities or assignments where the chance of success is high; to start modestly; and to balance student needs against your own. The book includes two appendices. The first is material from Weimar's own Communication class and supplemental material that can work to guide a teacher through the construction of her course including activities, participation policies, grades, etc. The second is a resource section for developing learning skills.

I have aimed to give a presentation that highlights some of the content in the context of the current climate of increased emphasis on quality and justification of what we do and how we do it. I have, therefore, wanted to give a taste of some of the findings that have direct implications for teaching. The language is very accessible while the presentation remains scholarly in terms of support. The plethora of concrete examples serves well to illustrate the theory and principles she presents. Despite the number of newer books on the learner-centered approach, Weimar's book will remain a valuable contribution to the practice of teaching and the added section on research and its implications give the second edition additional value as an initial summary resource for arguments that support the learner-centered approach.