

Shifting the balance of learning agency: How learners become more active participants in their own learning

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Abstract

“Learning Agency is an independent think tank of teachers, advisers & lecturers who share a passion for learning. We see learning as a core human function, permeating every aspect of all our lives and the main engine of our progress as individuals, as groups and organizations and as society. We believe supporting learning is the core business of every school, college and university department and the prime responsibility of all teachers. Learning Agency exists to increase knowledge and understanding of learning both in and out of formal education and to show the benefits for all of living A Learning Life. Learning Agency manages this site, publishes materials to support learning, and advises schools, colleges and universities on improving their learning and teaching. We facilitate collaborative projects to develop understanding and good practice. We seek to inform policy and practice on the basis of research evidence. “The number of children identified as learning disabled has increased greatly in recent years, making this category the larger in special education. Though the problem of the education of learning disabled children presents a big challenge to educators everywhere, the problem assumes special significance in India. In view of the rapidly growing school population and high degree of wastage in educational efforts at primary level. While this wastage may be due to a number of factors of socio – economic backgrounds; the learning difficulties of children to specific areas must also be considered a potent cause contributing to a large scale failure and drop out in our schools. The research in this area in India is in its infancy. Therefore, it deserves serious attention of educationists and researchers.”

*“The day to day lives of people with a learning disability and their families have always been much affected by the way they are perceived and treated by the communities they live in. The history of public and private attitudes over the last three centuries is one of intolerance and lack of understand. **Learning disability** was formerly known as **mental handicap** or **mental retardation**. The foundation of the National Health Service in the UK in 1946 led to the development of a medical model of disability and the use of the term “**mentally handicapped**.” Institutions became hospitals, with the emphasis on caring for their residents. The 1959 **mental***

health act distinguished people with a ‘mental illnesses were from those described as having a mental handicap’

Introduction:

Learning Agency is an independent think tank of teachers, advisers & lecturers who share a passion for learning. We see learning as a core human function, permeating every aspect of all our lives and the main engine of our progress as individuals, as groups and organizations and as a society. We believe supporting learning is the core business of every school, college and university department and the prime responsibility of all teachers. Learning Agency exists to increase knowledge and understanding of learning both in and out of formal education and to show the benefits for all of living A Learning Life. Learning Agency manages this site, publishes materials to support learning, and advises schools, colleges and universities on improving their learning and teaching. We facilitate collaborative projects to develop understanding and good practice. We seek to inform policy and practice on the basis of research evidence. The modern media are centrally implicated in all of these processes; and this has particular implications for children and young people. For the global media industries, the young are the key consumers, whose tastes and preferences are frequently seen to set the trend for consumers in general. The formation and development of ‘youth culture’ – and, more recently, of a global ‘children’s culture’ – are impossible to separate from the commercial operations of the modern media. Both in research and in public debate, children are frequently seen to be most vulnerable to media influence; yet they are also seen to possess a confidence and expertise in their relations with media that are not available to the majority of adults. They are defined both as innocents in need of protection, and as a competent, ‘media-wise’ generation. Yet whichever view we adopt, the fact remains that adults are less and less able to control children’s access to the media. Whether we look to technological devices or to changes in regulatory policy, the means of control appear increasingly ineffective. The proliferation of media technology combined with the changing social status of children, mean that children can no longer be confined in the traditional ‘secret garden’ of childhood – if indeed they ever could.

These patterns of technological and structural change in the contemporary media environment – and the emergence of what some have called ‘The Third Media Age’ – thus present significant new dangers and opportunities for young people. Digital media – and particularly the internet –

significantly increase the potential for active participation; but they also create an environment of bewildering choices, not all of which can be seen as harmless. In this new situation, we are in urgent need of well-informed and sustained educational initiatives. We need to enable children to cope with the challenges posed by this new mediated environment; and we need to build upon and extend the new styles of learning and the new forms of cultural expression that the modern media make available to them. Only in this way will it be possible for today's children to take their place as active citizens in the complex, commercially-oriented, global societies which are now emerging. Ultimately, therefore, media education needs to be recognized as a fundamental human right. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child offers some important indications here. Article 13, for example, asserts children's right to freedom of expression; Article 17 proclaims their rights of access to a range of media and sources of information; while Article 31 identifies broader rights to leisure and to participation in cultural life. If children are to enjoy the rights proclaimed by this Convention – and hence to informed participation in the processes that govern their lives – media education must be seen as a fundamental entitlement for all.

Effective pedagogy:

To conclude this section, considerations from Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) are offered for the curriculum. These are drawn from case studies of settings that had proved effective in promoting children's learning and development. This research found that effective pedagogy was characterised by: A careful mix of adult-initiated group work and freely chosen child-initiated activities. The quality of shared, sustained dialogue and thinking between both adults and children and children and their peers. Adults' knowledge of child development and curriculum. Support for children to represent their understanding in a range of means. Skilled assessment of children's learning and consequent strategic planning for a wide range of curriculum experiences. In recent decades of research on effective pedagogical approaches in postsecondary education, there has been a significant shift of focus away from what instructors do to what students are learning. As opposed to viewing students as vessels for the transmission of information by instructors, student-centred learning is premised on the notion that students are able to actively participate in the construction of knowledge with the facilitation of teachers. Landmark article "From Teaching to Learning-A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education" emphasizes the need for post-secondary education to shift towards a "learning paradigm" that

encourages agency to be shared between the teacher and the student. This shift comes as a response not only to cognitive and educational research on factors that contribute to effective learning but also as a response to the need for institutional resilience in the face of increasing pressures from rising university costs, declining public investments, expanding enrollments, and a shifting landscape from which to draw faculty

Current article on the need to transform Canadian post-secondary education to a student-centered Model. In the midst of these pressures, Barr and Tagg argue that the university has come to mistake its means for an end, operating on the assumption that the university exists to provide instruction. By contrast, they assert that the real purpose of a university is to produce learning. In the learning paradigm, learning is viewed as an active process in which students learn how to think, not what to think. Built upon a constructivist philosophy of education which posits that the learner creates knowledge from experience, student-centered learning uses collaboration, assessment, respect for varied learning styles, and interpersonal relationships to encourage students to construct knowledge, make meaning, and develop skills while making connections with prior knowledge. As student-centered learning is process-oriented, students develop valuable skills to be lifelong learners, which mean they will be much more adaptable and resilient in a world now defined by constantly changing work and learning environments. Because learning is considered an active process in the learning paradigm, a new relationship develops between the university's traditional pillars of teaching and research. No longer can they be considered separate undertakings. In the learning paradigm, research and scholarship are key and integral components of teaching and learning, whether in undergraduate, graduate or professional schools and faculties. While teaching and research have sometimes been viewed as competing interests in the university, the learning paradigm bridges that terrain more effectively because it views them as related components of an integrated learning environment. But beyond adopting new teaching practices and pedagogical techniques, a focus on learning entails a fundamental paradigm shift and the adoption of a new mindset. Recently, growing interest in student-centered learning has translated into a wider focus on learner-centered institutions. *Leading the learner-centered campus: An administrator's framework for improving student learning outcomes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. In their book, the authors provide insight in how to lead institutional change and make the transition to student-centered learning.

The learner-centered classroom is viewed as a microcosm of the institution itself where there is a plethora of practices, resources and supports aligned with the learner-centered paradigm. In her book, *Learner-Centered Teaching*, Maryellen Weimer (2002) Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. San Francisco: Jossey- Bass. Identifies five key changes in practice that materialize when instructors move to operating within a learner-centred paradigm. Harris and Cullen further maintain that the administrative application of these principles of learner-centeredness throughout the institution is equally as relevant. A learner-centered institution will strive to attend keenly to how well its structures, practices, and *policies uphold and respond to these principles*:

1. **Balance of Power:** Creating community through sharing power and control
2. **Function of Content:** Creating relevance by focusing on what the learner learns as opposed to what the knowledge is to be disseminated.
3. **Role of the Teacher:** Leaders assuming roles akin to the learner-centered teacher who is described as a facilitator, designer, or guide
4. **Responsibility for Learning:** Fostering a climate for learning by creating community
5. **Assessment and Evaluation:** Using assessment to monitor ongoing learning and gauge effectiveness

Characteristics of Student-Centered Learning:

The hallmark of a student-centered environment is one that places the student at the center of policies, practices, and decision-making. However, student-centered learning is more than a set of specific practices or techniques; it has become an entire approach or philosophy regarding the learning enterprise and represents a paradigm shift occurring in many institutions of higher learning. As an integrative approach to learning, it exhibits certain core characteristics, regardless of discipline or content:

Emphasis on Active Learning:

Student-centered learning employs *active learning* techniques, which include team learning, problem-based learning, peer evaluation, and self-directed learning. Active learning operates in an environment of *mutual respect* between instructor and student, and contributes to building a

sense of community amongst participants. Instructors recognize that there are a *variety of learning styles*, and they employ techniques that effectively respond to that variety. Effort is put into *building consensus* rather than assuming consensus in class decisions. Course objectives take into account the need for *interactivity*. Active learning communicates a sense of participants' *personal excitement, passion and commitment* toward the material. *Relevant and interesting* aspects of course material are emphasized, especially at introductory levels, to improve learning and retention. *The instructor is regarded more as a facilitator, coach, or resource person*, rather than a „sage on the stage“. Active Student Responding: Increasing Learner's Motivation and Self-Monitoring

How can we increase student motivation, buy-in and responsibility for their own learning and still keep them engaged? According to studies, active student responding can increase student success and can allow students to become more engaged in their own learning as an active participant. The idea behind active student responding is that students become responsible for their own learning by participating in activities on all levels and all students are an equal participant in the learning activities, rather than just the student who is called on or raises his or her hand. This technique has been shown to be successful with students with disabilities as well as typical students (Lerner, 2011).

There are many benefits to active student responding including:

- **More student engagement**
- **Increased scores on tests and quizzes**
- **Less off task and out of seat behavior**
- **Increased retention of facts and information**

Active student responding has been tried at many different grade levels, including college and in training programs as well, with good results (Colbert, 2005). When using active student responding, there are many different techniques that instructors can use to actively engage all the students. Instructors are encouraged to be creative in thinking of ways to facilitate student participation and ownership.

Some types of active student responding activities are:

- **Choral responding**
- **Using response cards**
- **Using personal white boards**
- **Reading out loud**
- **Fill in the blank supplements to lectures and other activities**

There are many other interesting ways to enhance student participation using these techniques. Instructors are encouraged to be creative in thinking of ways to facilitate student participation and ownership of their learning. In addition to the actual techniques involved in active student responding, instructors should be familiar with the benefits of this teaching method and how this strategy increases learning and decreases problematic behavior.

Students as Active Partners:

Involving students in the assessment and evaluation process is an essential part of balanced assessment. When students become partners in the learning process, they gain a better sense of themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers. As students reflect on what they have learned and on how they learn, they develop the tools to become more effective learners. Students need to examine their work and think about what they do well and in which areas they still need help. To guide students in understanding the process of self-evaluation, you may want to have them complete a Self-Reflection/Self-Assessment sheet of your own. Once students have reflected on their learning, they are ready to set new goals for themselves. As they work toward these goals, they should be encouraged to reflect on their learning journey at regular intervals. You might have students record their observations during these periods of self-reflection to help reaffirm their goals and motivate them to move toward meeting each goal. With practice, students who self-assess become more conscious learners, able to apply knowledge of their learning needs and styles to new areas of study. As students become more active participants in the assessment process, they will begin to evaluate their strengths and attitudes, analyze their progress in a particular area, and set goals for future learning.

The key features of active learning:

Active learning is the principal learning and teaching approach recommended for SPHE. It requires children to actively participate in their learning in a wide variety of ways, thereby increasing the possibility of internalising what they have explored and of being able to use the

learning in their everyday lives. Active learning contributes significantly to fostering self-confidence, self-discipline and self-control in the learner.

- ***Active learning is a process.*** As children participate meaningfully in their own learning they engage in a process in which they can begin from what they already know, explore possibilities, question, draw conclusions and reflect on outcomes. It is essential that children are given the opportunity to progress through the various stages of the process in order that they can make sense of the learning for themselves and make new connections.
- ***Active learning can be carried out by individual children or in group situations and by all age groups.*** Children can be actively involved in their learning while working independently or alternatively as they interact with and learn from their classmates. In SPHE there will be a particular emphasis on small-group activities while also recognizing that on occasions individual activities might be the most appropriate to the objectives at hand. Active learning can take place at all class levels in the school: infant classes engaging in structured play activities and engaging with materials in all aspects of the curriculum; senior classes critically reflecting on media images and creating news stories.
- ***Active learning engages children at different levels.*** Children can be engaged in their learning at a physical level through hands-on experiences such as making, constructing and designing, or simply in standing up or changing place as a response. They can be involved at an emotional level as they explore their feelings about a particular topic, hypothesize or give a personal opinion, whereas analyzing, questioning, reflecting, negotiating or summarizing require participation at a cognitive level. Opportunities should be provided for children to actively engage in their learning at a variety or combination of these levels in order to increase motivation and maximize understanding.
- ***Active learning promotes action.*** As children take part in activities, they learn to transfer the learning to situations they may encounter in their everyday lives and to the decisions and choices that they make. Active participation in learning is therefore significant in helping children to acquire health related messages and to put these into practice in their own lives. Similarly, as they learn the meaning of responsible citizenship they are encouraged to take steps to become active participants in their own communities.
- ***Active learning places children at the center of the learning process.*** The content of activities for use in the classroom should relate as much as possible to the environment

and lives of the children. This ensures that issues explored are relevant and linked to the child's own experience.

- ***Active learning requires the teacher to guide and direct the work.*** The role of the teacher is crucial to the active learning process. The teacher needs to act as a guide, a facilitator and a resource, providing a variety of appropriate opportunities for children to engage in their own learning. The teacher also needs to continually encourage them to construct meaning and make connections for themselves. How the activities are organized, the depth of exploration and the level of questioning and critical reflection will all be determined by the classroom teacher. The teacher will also be responsible for the provision of a wide variety of strategies, in order to cater for individual needs and to help all children to experience some success.
- ***Active learning requires an atmosphere of trust and support.*** Active learning will be most effective when it takes place in an atmosphere of trust and flexibility. Children need to feel secure in giving their own point of view, knowing that they are respected as individuals and that their opinions are valued and taken into account.

In SPHE there is a particular emphasis on children working together. This can include many different types of group interaction, such as collaborative work in small or large groups, structured play activities in the infant classes or co-operative learning activities in twos and threes. ***Learning as a group can help children to***

1. develop a shared sense of purpose and achieve a common goal by using the diversity of talents within a group
2. develop and practice language skills
3. develop a wide range of interpersonal skills, including leadership, communication, delegation and time management
4. operate as a social unit and learn from and with each other
5. develop an acceptance of each other and respect individual differences by learning to appreciate other points of view, by listening to others, and on occasions by conceding individual objectives in favor of the wider group purpose
6. develop a sense of democracy in the class, encouraging them to extend their relationships to those normally outside their circle of friends

7. develop higher-order thinking skills, such as asking relevant questions, solving problems in various ways, drawing conclusions, and making informed decisions
8. Be accountable and develop a sense of responsibility for the learning of others as well as their own learning.

The most effective group work takes place in groups of twos and threes, particularly in the earlier years in school. As the children gain experience in group practices they will be able to work effectively in larger groups. Positive learning outcomes do not automatically occur because children are sitting in close proximity: efficient group learning requires the development of a wide range of learning and social skills and a competent classroom management system.

Group processes in the class will be more effective when

- A. **They are introduced at an early age and over time:** The skills required of children will take some time to develop and will be greatly enhanced if practiced from the earliest possible age. Skills in turn-taking, listening, voicing opinions, recording ideas and reaching consensus are all prerequisites for effective group learning.
- B. **Roles are assigned to each member of the group:** A useful way to promote real and meaningful learning in a group is to assign a particular role to each group member. Having a role will ensure that all children contribute to the learning process and that the outcomes will be dependent on the combined work of the whole group. These roles should vary depending on the needs of the children, their experience in group learning, and the nature of the activity.
- C. **The process is regularly reviewed:** The teacher will have to regularly monitor how learning is happening in the groups to ensure that children are benefiting from the process and that the objectives are being achieved. The opinions and views of the children will be central to this process, as will the informal observations of the teacher.

Conclusion

As the children gain experience in group practices they will be able to work effectively in larger groups. Positive learning outcomes do not automatically occur because children are sitting in close proximity: efficient group learning requires the development of a wide range of learning

and social skills and a competent classroom management system. Sometimes, especially when students are new at doing pair and share or interviewing each other or practicing skills on each other the first person takes too long and does not allow the second person to fully talk, practice, interview, etc. As a way to prevent that from happening, the instructor should be the time keeper and announce to the class that it is now time for the second person to begin talking or doing. You might also want to give them a little warning before the half time period and the end of the session. As students become more experienced with these paired activities, you can tell them that they will start becoming their own time keepers and that students need to learn to budget their time so both have equal access to participate. Many hard working students do not like working in groups because they feel they do all of the work, while others take advantage of them and they all get the same good grade. Their feelings may be justified. Here is a way to help these students learn to negotiate, trust and share with others.

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