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Learner-centredness

Nicholas Bremner

'Learner-centredness', or 'student-centredness', has become a frequently used buzzword in education and ELT more specifically. However, it is subject to multiple interpretations, and has been defined inconsistently in the literature (Neumann 2013; Starkey 2017). In many cases, 'learner-centred' seems to be used as a 'hooray word' (Harber and Davies 1997: 111); that is to say, a term that is advocated on a theoretical or political level, but may mean relatively little in practice.

Learner-centredness is a complex phenomenon which cannot be tied down to a specific set of methods, techniques or activities (Tudor 1996). Moreover, it is clear that the distinction between 'teacher-centredness' and 'learner-centredness' does not represent a binary opposition (Elen et al. 2007). Schweisfurth (2013) argues that a transition towards learner-centred education implies not only changes in *technique* (i.e. what teachers do with learners in the classroom), but also shifts in learner *motivation* (from extrinsic to intrinsic), a movement towards more democratic *relationships* between teacher and students, and a shift in *epistemology* from students acquiring a fixed body of knowledge towards potentially creating new knowledge.

In his influential book *The Learner-centred Curriculum*, Nunan (1988) argues that a learner-centred classroom implies considering learners' prior knowledge and experiences, involving learners in decision-making processes, and encouraging them to take increased responsibility for their learning, including developing their ability to 'learn how to learn'. Several other ELT authors have interpreted learner-centredness in a similar way (e.g. Tudor 1996).

In contrast, Jones's (2007) frequently cited handbook *The Student-centred Classroom*, whilst agreeing with Nunan in many areas such as the importance of learner autonomy, places more emphasis on real-life communication and active participation in learning tasks, aspects that Nunan mentions only relatively briefly. It could be argued that Jones's interpretation associates learner-centredness very closely with communicative language teaching, an interpretation that is not uncommon in the ELT literature (cf. Jacobs and Farrell 2001).

Most notably for those who share Nunan's perspective on learner-centredness, Jones (2007: 2) states that a learner-centred classroom 'isn't a place where the students decide what they want to learn and what they want to do' but is rather 'a place where we consider the needs of the students, as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process all the time'. This demonstrates that some teachers may interpret learner-centredness not in terms of learner control over decision-making, but rather as a question of keeping them as active as possible. This would seem to encompass Schweisfurth's notions of *technique* (and possibly *motivation*), without perhaps implying much change in terms of *relationships* or *epistemology*.

The wide variety of possible interpretations of the concept is illustrated in a recent meta-analysis, which analysed the definitions of learner-centredness in 326 academic journal articles published between 2010 and 2019 (Bremner 2020). The meta-analysis reveals six distinct, albeit somewhat overlapping, characteristics of learner-centredness:

1. *Active participation* (mentioned in 87 percent of definitions in the meta-analysis)—learners are encouraged to participate as much as possible in ‘hands-on’ learning activities; they ‘learn by doing’, both individually and through their interactions with others.
2. *Adapting to needs* (64 percent)—learning is tailored to meet learner needs (including their affective needs—see, for example, Tangney 2014) and, where possible, builds on learners’ current knowledge and experiences. Interestingly, some interpretations of learner-centredness suggest that adapting to learner needs, even if this means using traditionally ‘teacher-centred’ methods, is enough to define teaching as ‘learner-centred’ (e.g. Croft 2002). However, others have argued that, in such cases, a more appropriate term would be *learning-centred* (e.g. O’Sullivan 2004).
3. *Autonomy* (60 percent)—learners are encouraged to work independently both inside and outside the classroom, and to develop learning strategies to help them learn more effectively in the future.
4. *Relevant skills* (57 percent)—learners develop knowledge and skills that they are likely to need in real-world situations. These may include ‘higher-order’ skills such as creativity and critical thinking.
5. *Power sharing* (47 percent)—learners are given more choice and control over the content and process of their learning. This also incorporates the idea of more equal relationships between teachers and learners, and the idea that learners may not only learn existing knowledge but are capable of contributing to knowledge.
6. *Formative assessment* (19 percent)—learners are assessed not only to be given a grade, but also to be supported in their overall learning development; learning is seen as a process as opposed to a product.

The range of interpretations above demonstrates the difficulty of providing a unified, one-size-fits-all definition of learner-centredness. Indeed, although certain aspects may be more universally accepted than others (compare the percentages for 1 and 6 above, for example) and some, such as mutual respect between teachers and students, may be non-negotiable in all contexts (cf. Schweisfurth’s (2013: 146) ‘minimum standards’), there have been calls for a more flexible approach to definition of the term (Wang 2007; Bremner 2020). This is especially relevant given evidence that learner-centredness may be interpreted in different ways in different contexts. For example, *power sharing* above was mentioned in a much lower percentage of texts from East Asia compared to other cultural macro-regions (Bremner 2020). These findings support the work of Wang (2007: 248), who found that Chinese primary school language teachers adopted their own, culturally grounded interpretations of the concept, which incorporated several of the above aspects (notably *active participation*, *autonomy* and *adapting to needs*), but nevertheless remained largely ‘teacher-directed’, with the teacher ultimately responsible for adapting to learner needs. Learner-centredness has been criticized by some as being an ethnocentric, solely ‘Western’ concept (e.g. Guthrie 2011). However, allowing for flexibility of interpretation limits the weight of such criticisms. What is perhaps most important, from both a theoretical and a practical perspective, is that teachers, teacher educators, policymakers, and academics should be as clear as possible about what they mean when they refer to the term, so that, where possible, there can be a reduction in the ambiguity caused by multiple interpretations.

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