POSITION PAPERS
Student-Centered

Virginia Allery
A Guerrilla Perspective on the Meaning of Student-Centered Teaching and Learning

Diane Pike
On Being Student Centered

The Meaning of Student Centered will be discussed on October 30 at 3:30 in the Marshall Room.
A Guerrilla Perspective on the Meaning of Student-Centered Teaching and Learning

The phrase, "student-centered" teaching and learning resonates for all of us who have dedicated our lives to teaching. We essentially agree that the very nature and mission of our educational careers is in the service of students. So, why talk about a topic so integral to our chosen profession?

There is need to talk about student-centered teaching and learning because, institutionally, we have lost perspective. Our instructional paradigm, as we have operationalized it, does not view students as being equally important as the curricula and standards we so zealously protect in academia today. Our predominant educational paradigm has gradually been subsumed by an impersonal, dehumanizing system. Needless to say, we have played a major role in this movement by our acceptance of an instructional milieu bereft of meaningful context along with teaching methodologies that facilitate instruction but not learning.

Guerrilla action is needed to get us back on track. We, once again, need to place students at center stage. We need to seriously consider creative alternatives to our curriculum-centered instructional paradigm and to explore how we can facilitate synergy between content and presentation. Most importantly, we need to critically examine our epistemology which may be at the root of our problems.

Guerrilla Teaching

In the World Book Encyclopedia (1994) the word "guerrilla" includes such descriptions as independent, dedicated to a cause and very knowledgeable of the terrain. There is also considerable expertise in sabotage and warfare tactics. Eliminating reference to warfare and sabotage, we can use similar descriptors to describe guerrilla teachers.

Guerrilla teachers are, without a doubt, dedicated to students. They are independent, while acknowledging interdependence. They often take a metacognitive view to gain perspective of the larger terrain and teach from conviction, expressing a belief in the synergy between content and its presentation. They stay in the background, weaving environs open to nurturance. Positioning is determined by process and not by status.
Bringing the Outside, Inside: A Guerrilla Tactic

Student-centered learning is difficult to implement in our context-deprived classrooms. Thus, we begin with a short discussion of E.T. Hall’s (1977) concepts of low and high context communication. Using his terminology, it is argued that there is a need to incorporate more context into our instructional paradigm.

Low context communication emphasizes explicit information. That is, communication is verbal and is gained through direct questioning and analyses of information. It considers the physical (‘real world”) surroundings as extraneous to communication. Emphasis is on task and product since other contexts (emotional or otherwise) are not needed to understand the information.

In contrast, high context communication occurs within the physical surroundings which reduce the need for high volumes of explicit information. Skills of non-verbal communication are emphasized. Context is integral to communication, which is participative, and requires strengths in observation and listening. Emphasis is on process. There is acknowledgement that information is best understood in context and that misinterpretation is likely to occur without it.

It appears that the level of reliance on explicit information is proportional to the level of context. Our higher education system is overly reliant on volumes of explicit information because of its low context communication systems. It is, therefore, vulnerable to information overload. “Information overload is a technical term applied to information processing systems. It describes a situation in which the system breaks down when it cannot properly handle the huge volume of information to which it is subjected.” (Hall, p. 85)

As these systems are overloaded, they become unwieldly. They can stack only so many pieces before chaos ensues. The solution, for our dilemma, would seem to be to reduce the need for so much information by incorporating more context into our teaching and learning environments.

Fortunately, there is a new world emerging. It is the world of chaos; a quantum universe in which unusual, adaptive and relational phenomena
subterranean hole, the size of our small finger, in order to give us counsel on how to make the journey to our father, the sun. She is the woman who prepares baskets of food which multiply and she explains that there is plenty, always enough. (Oakes, Campbell, 1991)

We note the particularly effective guerrilla tactics she uses. The remarkable thing about Spider Woman is that she holds within her the answers—the ability to weave connecting strands from a center whorl—coming no less from her very self. This is herself she weaves and puts out to the wind. It is herself that shines in the sunlight. Her most powerful totem is to acknowledge the journey and to place it within the context of caring and relationship.

Like Spider Woman, we often ask our students to do the impossible but we forget to provide the “magical totems” that allow them to freely undertake their personal journeys. Instead, we ask our students to learn to think for themselves yet our methodologies require them to listen passively as we analyze and interpret information for them. We ask them to synthesize and connect ideas across disciplines but we support a system that separates learning into discreet, unrelated disciplinary areas. We wonder why so many of our students have poor self-esteem yet we invalidate them as human beings when we ignore their wealth of prior experiences. We ask students to transfer learning to their real world situations but we create low context environments because our epistemology supports learning as an essentially rational and intellectual activity.

Perhaps, these contradictions go much deeper than the institutional infrastructure, our instructional methodologies, or low context learning environments. At the very core of our problems could be our epistemological approach which objectifies the world. “. . . the way we know has powerful implications for the way we live. The mode of knowing that dominates higher education is called objectivism.” (Palmer, 1993)

The problem with such an objectivist epistemology is that “We make objects of each other and the world to be manipulated for our own private ends.” Palmer (1992) describes the following traits of this objectivist epistemological paradigm:
“There, students are expected to master materials and arguments and come to rational and objectively verifiable conclusions based on a falsely universal view of the world. At the heart of traditional pedagogy is the goal of mastery; an understanding of the truth of a work, what it really means, and thus an ability to dominate or control it the way that the authorities in the field have traditionally done.” (Maher and Tetreault, 1992)

How, then, does one use a “Newtonian” setting and create meaningful context? What guerrilla tactic would we use? How do we accommodate Black Elk, a Lakota medicine man, who thinks differently and who learned in the rich contextual setting of his family and his filial relationships? How do we bring the real world into this setting?

Initially, we learn about Black Elk. We find out what his worldview is. In this case, he happens to be a mystic who speaks of reality in terms of dreams and visions. We, therefore, have to come to some common understanding of reality and how dreams and visions shape his reality. We find out that he believes that the two leggeds and the four leggeds are brothers. H-m-m. A guerrilla teacher soon concludes that Newtonian laws are not going to work here. We have to find someone who speaks the same language. Enter David Bohm, the quantum physicist, whose explanation of implicate order, where everything is related to everything else, resonates with Black Elk’s understanding of reality. (Bohm, 1994)

In establishing relevancy for the students, it was critical to relate the more mystical concepts to the various disciplinary areas. For example, before discussing dreams and visions, a colleague in psychology lectured on Carl Jung’s psychological theory (the conscious, unconscious and archetypes) which provided a foundation for these discussions. Other disciplinary areas that were explored and integrated (in broad profile) were: physics, mythology, history and anthropology. Expertise in these areas was sought from colleagues who helped either through guest lecturing or recommending suggested readings or videos.

This multidisciplinary approach was helpful for students because it touched on disciplinary areas (even though quite briefly) with which they were familiar. Other contextual experiences included storytelling in metaphor, interactive lecturing, role playing, theatrical dramatizations,
works pedagogically. The principle is to create synergy between content and pedagogy.

Research is collaborative. The various departments collaborate on researching how well their students are learning and why. This information is, then, shared with other departments. Individual portfolios for tenure, promotion and leave must reflect how the individual contributed to departmental collaborative endeavors along with the ideas they have for future research.

Possible research questions: How do we create learning environments that help students move (per Bloom’s taxonomy) from analysis to synthesis? What implications does the emphasis on synthesis have for the design and development of courses? How well is well when it comes to knowing my content area? How can we forge connections across disciplinary lines without diluting the rigor of the content? How do we form praxis for students between content and experience? What mix is most effective?

Yearly reports of the college detail what and how well the graduates learned? What were the deterrents for those not graduating? In their capstone projects, graduating seniors would show what they had learned in portfolio format. They also would include what they would’ve liked to learn but, were not able to, because of learning constraints. These portfolios would be read by each department where the information would be synthesized for incorporation into department workplans.

How do we start change?

- First, by talking about change. “The primary reason the instruction paradigm is so powerful is that it is invisible. Its incoherencies and deficiencies appear as inherent qualities of the world.” (Barr, Tagg, ‘95)

- Second, talk about learning outcomes of existing programs and gradually move to institutional outcomes. “The more we learn about the outcomes of existing programs, the more rapidly they will change.” (ibid, p. 25)
Vision Planning Process

Position Paper: “On Being Student Centered”

by Diane Pike, Ph.D.
October 1, 1996

Introduction

Why would a college need to explain what it means to be “student-centered”? Surely it goes without saying that colleges serve students. Yet, just as an individual will occasionally step back from life, take a hard look, and think “Oh, yes...this is what it’s really all about,” likewise, an institution must take the opportunity to renew its understanding of its mission. The position taken in this paper is:

to be “learner-committed “ means that Augsburg College serves the best interests of our students by engaging in the shared work that creates successfully educated citizens.

In what follows, I suggest ways of understanding this statement as an important component of our vision for the future.

Learner Committed

Language is important. The phrase “student-centered,” while helpful in shifting our focus away from instructional or teacher-centered enterprises, is nonetheless a misleading image. “Learner-committed” is preferable. Faculty, students, staff, and administration are dedicated to the charge of formal education—to learning. Augsburg College itself is a community of scholars—of learners. Although students are the focus of our practice, learner better describes the broader view of our activity.

To be “centered” is also a problem. Generally the term is put forth as a response to “hierarchical” and is thus a political as well as a structural statement. We are misled, however, if we think of students as somehow like the sun at the center of our solar system or if we mistakenly ignore the reality (and sometimes the appropriateness) of hierarchy. If we are “centered” on anything at all, it is on learning itself. To be sure, as an organization committed to learning, no one is more important to us than our students. Yet, we are also a complex institution: we employ hundreds of

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1 A number of colleagues were helpful in developing these ideas and reading drafts. They bear no responsibility for the final position but their ideas and comments are much appreciated: Tom Morgan, Kristin Anderson, Charles Anderson, Elaine Cline, Mike Ranum, Pete Thorson, Chris Kimball, Nancy Steblay, Julie Olson, Frankie Shackelford, and Steve Willett.
and experience to continue learning over a lifetime. It is essential that we educate students for how they will live.

Equally essential, however, is a second dimension of how human beings live—the character of the educated person. Can you recognize the kind of person you are? If we allow ourselves to focus only on producing ready workers, we serve neither the best interests of the students nor of society. Education is not just about what you want to do—it is also about who you want to be. Citizenship demands this blending of ability and integrity.

Our commitment is to both these dimensions of being an educated person. Our behavior, values, and attitudes must reflect that commitment in our daily practice. Furthermore, we must be able to distinguish when we have succeeded and when we have not. Such assessment is achieved through common understandings of what is persuasive evidence that students have learned.

**Shared Work**

Ours is a collective not an individual endeavor. It is shared work where the whole of the college experience exceeds the summation of the parts. Obviously, individual relationships form the web of that collective work. Teachers, staff and students alike are sustained and changed by the personal and unique relationships we form. Yet these individual relationships represent a necessary but not sufficient condition for fulfilling our mission. The collective nature of our experience is also required. We can no more understand the behavior of a community merely by studying the individual members than we can know the migration behavior of a flock of geese simply by examining a single bird. A graduating class of well-educated men and women is a product of classroom experiences, dorm or commuter lounge conversations, music, student or athletic activities and so forth. Time together is important for us; the myriad of campus activities and services offered are enterprises we value and promote. It is the whole of these ties that bind that results in our success.

**Conclusion**

In his 1884 address to the graduating class, Georg Sverdrup noted that (then, as now) there were schools “where the aim appears to be the stuffing of knowledge into youth as one pours peas into an empty sack...where everything is communicated, but nothing is absorbed.” In his commitment to responsible personal individuality he made certain that Augsburg College would not be one of these schools³.