

Promoting a Learner-Centered Classroom by Creating a Community

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Introduction

With grants from the Ministry of Education in Japan to help set up professional development centers at major universities, like the Center for Professional Development at Tohoku University, more focus is being put on advanced education methodology, which has been developed and designed in mostly Western English speaking countries. When adopting concepts from abroad, it often takes efforts to adapt these to the specific cultural constraints. This is especially true with regards to learner-centered classrooms and active learning. While the advantages of these techniques apply to learning in general no matter where it is taking place, the culture and educational traditions of Japan, or other countries where it is implemented will impact perceptions and ease of implementation. In Western countries where students are used to speaking up in class and even questioning the accuracy of what the professor is saying, implementing active learning techniques will inevitably be much easier than introducing these “new” ideas into countries like Japan that have long embraced a strong form of the teacher-centered model where the students are not expected or encouraged to participate beyond taking lecture notes. Thus, as professional development experts introduce a more learner-centered form of teaching in these contexts, they need to focus attention on the

role of community building within the classroom as a way to ensure the success of active learning methods. Various community building techniques will be discussed and advice on implementation will then be provided.

Overview

Being primarily researchers, professors in Japan have until recently had little or no opportunity to get support with regards to their teaching. Without any information to sway them otherwise, most have continued teaching as they had been taught, in a teacher-centered classroom mainly through lectures. However, being researchers, they can more easily be convinced by research and persuasive arguments, and there is plenty of evidence that the traditional classroom where lectures dominate, or are even the sole teaching method, is not the most effective model for learning. For example, in a study conducted by Saunders (1980) at the end of a year long, two-semester course on introductory economics, students in the lecture-dominated class performed only 20 percent better than students who had never taken the course. The difference between the two groups of students diminished further when compared two years and seven years after the course. In yet another study, Ruhl et al. (1987) show significant improvements in both short-term and long-term retention when students were given breaks in the

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Teaching Method	Retention Rate
Lecture (Verbal Processing)	2%
Reading (Verbal Processing)	4%
Audiovisual (Verbal and Visual Processing)	7%
Demonstration (Verbal and Visual Processing)	11%
Discussion Group (Verbal and Visual Processing)	18%
Practice by Doing (Doing)	27%
Teach Others/Immediate Use of Learning (Doing)	31%

(Source: Data for the table above comes from Sousa, D. (2006). *How the Brain Learns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, pg. 95.)

lecture to discuss and clarify their notes with peers, compared to straight lecture-based classes. Sousa (2006) concisely summarizes his own research along with others on the impact various teaching methods have on the long-term retention rate of learner. This data is provided in the table above. Wankat (2002) in analyzing the literature points to attention span as the potential cause for the discrepancy in retention.

Many of these findings led to a seminal article by Barr and Tagg (1995) which detailed the shift from the concept that the role of higher education institutions was traditionally thought of as providing instruction to the mission of producing learning. This shift in thinking put emphasis on learning outcomes. Thus, there was no prescribed structure or methodology for teaching. Whatever learning activities are best for achieving the learning outcomes are what should be implemented. With the focus shifting to learning rather than teaching, the need for “significant learning experiences” (Fink, 2003) became apparent. Fink characterizes a significant learning experience as a process that is engaging and contains a high energy level that results in lasting change and some value in life (pg. 7). Achieving these “significant learning experiences” requires new teaching techniques that engage students in deeper thought processes, or active learning. Some of these methods include group work, case studies, debates, role plays, and problem based learning, to name a few. For more ideas and further

description of each technique please see Bean (2011) or Barkley (2010).

Many of these techniques require a high-level of interaction among students and are destined to fail without careful consideration about the design and implementation of the task in the classroom. However, design and implementation alone may not be enough to ensure success of active learning techniques in the classroom. Students must be prepared and acclimated to a new paradigm in order for a successful experience. This is especially true in contexts where the students’ prior learning may have been a more traditional setting where a strong form of the teacher-centered classroom exists, much like that of students in Japan.

Unlike students in Western countries where much of the research on learner-centered environments took place, Japanese students are expected to sit quietly, and listen to their teachers without questioning authority. For these students, the mere idea of interacting with the teacher or other students in class may be daunting. Therefore, more focus needs to be placed on community building in the classroom from the first day of class or even before.

Techniques for Community Building

By providing students with opportunities to interact with one another and the instructor and to adjust to the idea that they are expected to engage with others in class, their resistance to active

learning techniques will be lowered. While by no means comprehensive, the ideas below are meant to provide a starting point for teachers who want to develop a more learner-centered approach to teaching.

1 . *Provide students with ample information*

The first step to making students feel that they are part of what is happening in class is to give them as much information as possible about the class, their role within the class, and how to successfully navigate the semester. Diamond (quoted in O'Brien et. al., 2008) states it well by saying, "The research on teaching and learning is consistent: the more information you provide your students about the goals of a course, their responsibilities, and the criteria you will use to evaluate their performance, the more successful they will be as students and the more successful you will be as a teacher." This has led to a movement toward more extensively detailed syllabi that more resemble handbooks that students can refer back to throughout the semester to remind themselves of certain aspects of the course.

Along with the traditional information, such as instructor contact information, textbook, course description, basic schedule, and assessment criteria, a learner-centered syllabus now includes such things as course objectives, student learning outcomes, the teacher's role, the student's role, requirements for the course, expectations, a teaching philosophy statement, a statement on academic honesty, and even a personal statement about the instructor. In short, the learner-centered syllabus is a comprehensive document about all aspects of the class.

Just providing a syllabus for the students is not enough though. Making sure they understand it and giving them time to digest the information is equally important. When asking colleagues about how they

handle the syllabus on the first day of class, I was surprised to learn that most of them didn't even mention it at all. They just started into the material immediately. This is much along the lines of thinking that just because the instructor says something the students have learned it. I have found that in reality, most students pay little or no attention to the syllabus before coming to class and the syllabi required by my institution for the "Syllabus Book" must fit onto one page, so it is not detailed enough in the first place.

2 . *Shifting the students' paradigm – getting them involved from the beginning*

As mentioned earlier, most Japanese students are entering university having been educated in a teacher-centered environment, and they most likely will be expecting the same thing in university. In actuality, they are probably getting the same thing in many of their classes, so switching to a student-centered environment is an uncomfortable and sometimes shocking experience. By acclimating students to a learner-centered classroom from the very first day of class, the teacher is building a base from which active learning techniques are more likely to succeed. In "Successful Beginnings for College Teaching: Engaging your students from the first day," McGlynn (2001, p. 55) insists, "... we need to pay attention to more than how we best present course material." "Effective teachers create an atmosphere of trust and warmth between themselves and their students."

An ideal way of getting students to "buy into" this teaching/learning methodology is by explaining to the students why classroom participation is important and how it will benefit their learning. This concept should not just be presented at the beginning of the course but should be continually reiterated throughout the course to remind the students of its importance and to maintain the students' motivation

for using active learning techniques throughout the semester.

The learner-centered syllabus is a wonderful resource for creating the atmosphere McGlynn describes along with fostering community building in the classroom. Below I have outlined techniques for not only engaging the students, but also helping them to internalize information from the syllabus.

a. Give and Take – Students and Instructors getting to know each other

Rather than writing a personal statement about yourself in your syllabus, the instructor could leave space within the syllabus to be filled in by students after asking questions of their instructor. Often as a foreign instructor, I feel that students cannot relate to me because they have no experience interacting with foreigners. By having students work in pairs to generate questions they would like to know about me, they meet and interact with one another while also getting to know me, the instructor. By getting to know personal aspects about their instructor and interacting with him/her and possibly even introducing his or her partner, the students begin to find commonality that builds connections and makes it easier to approach and interact with that faculty member.

b. Syllabus Quiz

Since the instructor needs to go over the syllabus with the students to make sure they understand it, why not make it a student-centered task instead of a teacher-centered one? If the teacher prepared questions about the syllabus, students could work in pairs to answer the quiz. Alternatively, they could work individually and check their answers with one another upon completion negotiating over the questions that they did not answer the same. The instructor could then elicit answers and indicate whether

they are correct or incorrect.

c. Other Aspects to Community Building

There are many other techniques a teacher can use to make students feel included in class. However, some very simple changes one could make that have potentially big impacts on how students perceive a class are:

1. Learning the students' names by using a seating chart or name cards.
2. Engaging students informally before the start of class.
3. Being responsive to students by addressing problems or answering questions in a timely manner.
4. Providing positive reinforcement even when the student might not have come up with the correct response.

3. Giving Students a Voice

The classroom is often an intimidating place because usually all aspects of the class are decided by the teacher, and the students are just required to do what they are told. By giving students some say in the decision making process, they feel more ownership in the process, which can be an enormous motivating force. While certain aspects of course design do not lend themselves to student input, such as textbook selection or grading criteria, there are two areas where it might be relatively easy to ask for and incorporate student input.

a. Classroom Policies/Rules

Rather than writing the rules or conduct code into the syllabus, the teacher could turn this into a group work exercise, having the students decide upon rules that must be followed in the class. This might require some direction from the instructor to make sure all of the necessary topics are covered. Teachers that I have talked to who have

incorporated this into their classes report that students tend to be much harsher than the teachers would have been and there is much less dissatisfaction with the consequences if and when the rules are not followed.

b. Assignments, Quizzes and Tests

Teachers could provide alternative assignments allowing the form of assessment the students feel best fits them. Many people feel they are not good test-takers, so giving an option of, for, example writing an essay instead of taking a test would make the student feel more valued as an individual.

Summary

The benefits of using active learning techniques in the classroom are clearly documented in the ever-growing literature on the learner-centered classroom. However, implementing these strategies into a class that has had little opportunity to interact with one another up to that point would most likely fail. Teachers that are trying to incorporate these strategies may then become more reticent about using active learning techniques in the future and, thus, revert back to a more lecture-based class.

By building community in the classroom from the very first day of class with the techniques outlined in this article along with others that can be found in the literature, students can gradually acclimate themselves to an unfamiliar task leading to more productive active learning in the future.

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