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Student-Centered Learning

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STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

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When I started teaching, or trying to, I scarcely thought about how to use class time. Just lecture, hope for some discussion, give tests; what else was there to it, except perhaps for pacing the content? I thought this would disseminate knowledge to the students. This belief lasted a semester, and collided with the evidence of what students had actually learned. Fortunately, my colleagues helped me see that what we do as instructors in itself is unimportant; what we do matters only insofar as it affects our students' learning.

Really understanding student-centered learning is another matter, however. I've been a slow learner, but been at this long enough to raise some issues. Let's pretend, then, we're in a classroom together, and I'm not monopolizing discussion as I am, necessarily, writing at you here. I ask, what fires up your interests? What activities make you feel you're completely in your element and unaware of time? We'll sketch out these on a board. Where will I try to nudge our discussion? From topics that you care about to discussing class time. Why? Because student engagement drives the good use of class time.

I could not coach you or anyone without knowing what matters to you and what you currently understand. So I would remind us – hopefully you'd tell me – that students learn gradually, with accretions to what they already know. All learning is like a metaphor: we take something we know well as a jumping-off point for something we do not. Our discussion would thus transition from our interests to how we get students engaged about their interests. With some topics it's tough to engage student interests. For example, last week I taught about corporate strategy, a topic remote from the undergrads' experience. So I started by asking who'd worked in a "corporate" office, or worked elsewhere and heard about what "corporate" was up to. We followed with examples of small businesses transitioning to dealing with corporate strategy level issues. My slides were mainly questions, which succeeded in drawing out conversation.

Fortunately, in teaching entrepreneurship it's easy to find personal interests. One student cares about helping abused women; another about solar heating; another about tastier ice cream near the campus. We can take these passions as our starting points, abandoning our preconceptions about their appropriate aims, such as "high potential" ventures, "social ventures" or anything else – unless our particular students have cares in these directions. When we start this way we can engage them in project after project. And in doing this, we do need to think about class time. There are many possibilities (which is good, since students need variety). Here are some examples:

Explaining the course and its projects

This takes time if students are used to passive learning; this probably means all students.

Case discussion.This is where I started when I learned that my lectures weren't working. Cases teach us what students do and do not understand. However, getting students to prepare or to know how to discuss cases is difficult in many schools. Moreover, it can be tough to find cases that resonate with our particular students and writing them is quite a task.

Lecturettes.These can be question-based. For example, in tomorrow's class we'll talk about "how do you learn about competitors?" One direction I'll lead the class, as the chance arises, is seeing that when we know what customers really want we thereby can learn who our competitors are. It's best to call on everyone, with everyone knowing their role … for example, one student can put the material in the context of the restaurant business; another understands cash flows.

Small group discussion.Students need lots of feedback in a non-threatening fashion, and this provides it in their own terms. We should visit the groups, and finish with semi-structured report-backs and our thoughts on the way forward, to keep the groups productive. A twist on small groups is teamwork on projects, especially useful for students whose high school experience made them loners by virtue of having actually studied.[1] The work done in teams can be graded for individual contributions: I recommend this.

Student presentations.These don't have to be formal. In fact, I've erred by making them too formal. That way presentations failed to help anyone recognize the strengths and weaknesses and see how to improve the work. Presentations of a sort also occur in small groups. More formally they can take the form of posters and small "fairs" displaying student work. Sadly, presentations are often the only way student voices get heard. Wander up and down a hallway in class time and listen; you'll get the feel for the culture of learning in your college. The ratio of student talk to instructor talk is a good measure of how well our students are learning.

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1 Nelson, C. E. 1996. Student diversity requires different approaches to college teaching, even in math and science. American Behavioral Scientist, 40: 165-175.