

Holistic Learning-Centeredness: De-Centering the University for Social Justice

Institutions of higher education, and those of us who teach and work in them, tend to see themselves as the center of their students' world. Even progressive colleges and universities that emphasize learner-centered education position themselves as fonts of knowledge to which students come to imbibe. Within more enlightened classrooms, we see a welcome shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy, but perhaps it is time to consider *de-centering the institution itself* in a move toward a more radically learner-centered paradigm. Such a shift can empower students; honor, celebrate, and capitalize upon diverse backgrounds; and reflect and promote the socially just, democratic, and multicultural world that most of us want to realize. In the process of effecting that shift, we might find ourselves energized, transformed, and enthusiastic teachers, in deeper partnership with our students and our communities. I hope in this essay to extrapolate from the scholarly literature on learner-centered teaching to make the case for learner-centered institutions of higher education, which would entail a de-centering of those institutions from our diverse students' point of view, and suggest how ePortfolios might serve as a useful and potentially transformative component of such a paradigm shift.

Whole Students, Holistic Learning

In 2011, Anita Martin (not her real name) earned a bachelor's degree at the University of Washington Bothell, having successfully navigated a challenging, interdisciplinary major in society, ethics, and human behavior. Like all students, though, Martin was more than just a college student. She also was an avid mountain biker, an aspiring entrepreneur, and a mentor and teacher to girls just starting to cycle. She learned tremendously from each of these endeavors, but, by intellectually linking those experiences

from on campus and off-campus in her ePortfolio capstone course in UW Bothell's School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, she found that her education was greater than the sum of its parts: "I have developed skills in critical thinking, research, collaboration, writing and presentation that I am already applying to my work," she writes.

Providing opportunities for students to reflect upon what they experience and learn in all aspects of their lives—in the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and activities entirely outside the university—becomes especially crucial as U.S. campuses become increasingly diverse. Explicit acknowledgment of students' numerous communities, of which the university is only one, helps democratize higher education and, in the long run, promotes a broader social democracy. What if all colleges and universities fostered truly holistic learning among their students, giving up the implicit assumption that all, or nearly all, learning happens on campus?

Teachers in higher education are increasingly, and laudably, viewing themselves as guiding—rather than delivering knowledge to—students. Dating back at least as far as Stephen D. Brookfield's influential book, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995), the concept of learner-centered education has gradually and positively transformed higher education, particularly after Maryellen Weimer outlined practical, effective ways of adapting classroom practice to implement Brookfield's ideas about fostering student learning in *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* (2002)¹. In the last decade or so, increasing numbers of seasoned teachers and proportionally greater numbers of young, newly-trained lecturers and assistant professors have learned how to design or adapt their

¹ Weimer "contrasts the practices of teacher-centered college teaching and student-centered college teaching in terms of (1) the balance of power in the classroom, (2) the function of course content, (3) the role of the teacher versus the role of the student, (4) the responsibility of learning, [and] (5) the purpose and processes of evaluation" (Wright, 2011, p. 92).

courses to de-center themselves and instead consider their students' achievements of explicit, articulated learning goals to be the organizing principle of their courses. In short, they have learned to ask, "What do I want my students *to be able to do* by the end of the course?" rather than "What do I need to *cover* in this course?" (Wright, 2011). One can see how the former question is one about *outcomes for students* whereas the latter question—the core question that teachers have asked for generations—privileges the *teacher*, as suggested in figure 1.

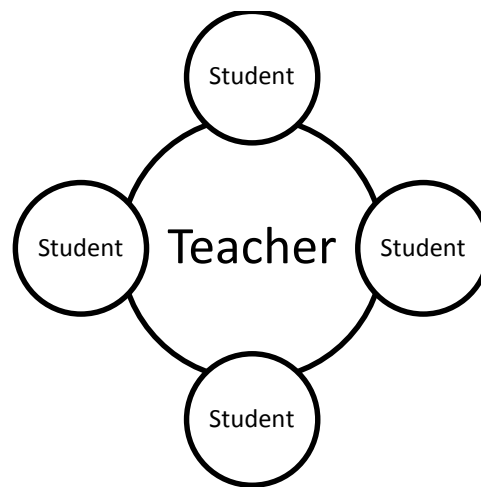


Figure 1: Teacher-Centered Pedagogy

Yet institutions of higher education have not made an analogous shift in orientation on the *institutional* level. Individual classrooms, one by one, are becoming more student-centered as teachers learn to de-center themselves in their pedagogical approaches, but colleges and universities as institutions need to acknowledge and respond to the reality that they are not the exclusive venues of student learning. Our students and our institutions themselves will benefit greatly if and when we de-center the institutions in our minds and organizations.

Although definitions vary, learner-centered teaching essentially transfers the locus of learning from the teacher to the student. This conceptual shift entails the teacher as guide, putting resources (including, but not limited to, his or her own knowledge) at the students' disposal and creating opportunities for students to learn inside and outside of class. Rather than “covering” the “content” of the course, the teacher helps *uncover* the content. As figure 2 shows, the teacher thus becomes *one*—but not the *only*—source of learning for each student.

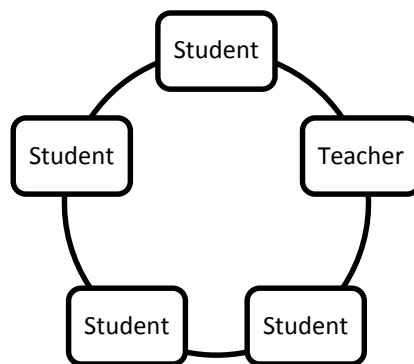


Figure 2: Student-Centered Pedagogy

Learner-Centered Classrooms to Learner-Centered Campuses

On an institutional level, however, we still implicitly assume that our campuses are the primary, if not sole, locus of student learning. We occasionally remember to consider our co-curricular offerings as educational opportunities for our students, augmenting the curriculum, but what about learning that happens completely outside our institutions? As figure 3 suggests, students learn not only in our classes, student organizations, and dormitories, but in their homes, friendships, workplaces, and elsewhere.

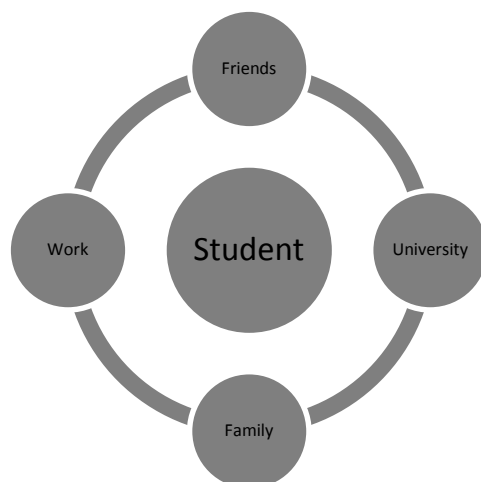


Figure 3: De-Centering the University

This is not to say, however, that colleges and universities are no different from other learning venues in a student's life. Unlike the other nodes, higher learning institutions are uniquely well-suited to help a student reflect upon and integrate learning from all avenues. Our faculty and staff, as well as other students, are, one would hope, already oriented toward integrative learning, particularly through high-impact practices such as capstone experiences and ePortfolios. Colleges and universities can help students draw from a variety of life experiences to enrich their education.

To best serve our students in this capacity, however, we need to work harder to recognize and value—if not credential—off-campus learning. Just as one example, we can explicitly request ePortfolio artifacts from students' off-campus learning experiences. A collaboratively-developed instruction manual for Army helicopter maintenance, for instance, can help a military veteran document her achievement of collaboration and leadership outcomes. A student can use a sermon written for a church youth group as evidence of achievement in writing, and critical thinking might be demonstrated through an analysis produced on the job. Moreover, by inviting and encouraging artifacts from students' communities, we recognize, validate, and honor those aspects of students' lives, which is

particularly important for students of color who might feel that the college campus is an alien space.

Transforming Students, Transforming Teachers

The narrative form of ePortfolios, or any practice that encourages students to integrate their learning through language, leads to growth not only for the students, but for us as teachers and administrators. By deepening our understanding of our students' backgrounds and perspectives through our students' own words, we gradually erode our necessarily limited worldviews. Exposure to a broader range of backgrounds and viewpoints makes us better, more sensitive, more knowledgeable teachers, and our curricula and our campuses grow more hospitable and relevant—transformed and transformative, not only for students at risk for marginalization, but for all of our students. This expansion of world views might be especially important for teachers who identify as white, who are more likely to have unexamined, naturalized views of Euro-American culture (Sleeter, 2001). Chang and Rosiek (2003) note that “teachers need some knowledge of the history of students' specific cultural groups in order to teach ... well to *all* students” (251, emphasis in original). They further state: “If our conception of the curriculum is adversely influenced by an ideology so pervasive that few if any practitioners may be thinking outside of it, then looking only to existing practices for wisdom will simply reproduce that hegemony” (252). Encouraging and listening to students' voices will inevitably shift the locus of authority from the teacher and the institution to the students themselves and the communities from which they come and with which they engage.

Learning new pedagogical practices takes time, patience, and commitment, of course. Teaching is already hard. What education critic Lisa Delpit (2012) says about K-12 teachers

applies just as well to those of us who teach on the college level: “Education is not for the weak-willed. There are so many elements that fight against us—senseless bureaucracies, unfeeling systems, societal inequities, to name but a few. It is not easy to keep one’s courage up” (p. 3). We will maintain and renew our inspiration, however, if we see the potentially transformative power of emerging pedagogies that recognize, reflect, and celebrate our students’ diversity. Delpit (1992) argues elsewhere that “supporting students’ transformation demands an extraordinary amount of time and commitment, but . . . teachers can make a difference if they are willing to make that commitment” (p. 296-297). “Educators need to learn about their students” (p. 30) and about themselves, as Sonia Nieto (2012) notes: “The result of . . . deep introspection can be a personal transformation” (p. 30). We can do so with mutual support, however: Growing as a teacher “means working to create a community of colleagues because all teaching, besides being tremendously difficult, can also be incredibly lonely” (Nieto, 2012, p. 31). By recognizing our institutions of higher education as but one component of a local, regional, and national web of social institutions—i.e., part of but not a dominator of communities—we can create a more communal professoriate.

Multicultural Pedagogies in a (Putative) Democratic Society

De-centering higher education institutions represents the next logical step in fashioning a more multicultural education which in turn contributes to a more equitable and democratic society. Geneva Gay (1997) defines “multicultural education” as “a pedagogy of the oppressed, resistance, hope, possibility, equity, emancipation, and reconstruction. It is both an advocacy and agency of peoples, perspectives, and issues marginalized in U.S. society because of race, ethnicity, and class” (p. 5). She notes that, because educational

institutions in the U.S. were designed to perpetuate a Eurocentric and class-based social structure, multicultural education necessarily shakes up the status quo:

Multicultural education ... requires the revision of some long-held beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes quality curriculum content and pedagogical processes, and the most desirable sociocivic order. Inclusion of more knowledge, respect, and promotion of ethnic, cultural, and social diversity is an essential part of this revision. These demands pose serious dilemmas—even threats—to many school leaders because they feel unprepared to respond adequately to them. They, in effect, place society and schools in tension with themselves, torn between needs for continuity, stability, and change. These tensions between change and stability are consistent with the character of the democratic spirit and experiment (p. 6).

We overreach as teachers, however, if we seek to control or contain the threats to our own educational institutions or to our society. Instead, we should seek to arm the individuals in our classrooms with knowledge, voice, and ethics, and encourage them to continue engaging other individuals and institutions in their lives, having fostered in them critical thinking and sociopolitical analysis skills, laced with social consciences (Gay, 1997).

Gaining Influence by Giving Up (Some) Power: ePortfolios and Campuses

Certainly, ePortfolios are not the only pedagogical technique that can help de-center ourselves and our institutions in order to support the empowerment and transformation of our students. We need more culturally-sensitive and inclusive scholarship of teaching and learning to identify other pedagogical innovations, and that work must be informed by and performed in collaboration with the communities with whom we seek to ally ourselves. In that pursuit, we would do well to remember John Dewey's call for, in Jerry Rosiek's (2003)

words, “a *qualitative experimentalism* in the social sciences that takes individual lived experience as the beginning and end point of its inquiries” (p. 165; emphasis in original). Delpit (2012) furthermore reminds us that “people are experts on their own lives. While we in academia are predisposed to accept unquestioningly research studies written by others about marginalized groups, these studies must be read skeptically. No one is an expert on someone else’s life ... [and] nothing can replace listening to what people have to say about themselves” (p. 5). I would argue, though, that ePortfolios might be especially useful for truly multicultural education because our students are experts on their own lives and we can learn so much from their narratives of their whole lives—inside and outside our classrooms—in their own voices.

In fact, it is crucial that we enable our students to speak *in their own voices*, especially students of color and those from other less-privileged backgrounds. Citing James Paul Gee’s distinction between primary Discourses² (those learned in the home) and secondary Discourses (those promulgated in groups and institutions that one later encounters), Delpit (1992) insists:

Teachers must recognize the conflict Gee details between students’ home Discourses and the Discourse of school. [Some students] perceive ... a painful choice between allegiance to “them” or to “us.” The teacher, however, can reduce this sense of choice by transforming the new Discourse so that it contains within it a place for students’ selves. To do so, they must saturate the dominant Discourse with new meanings, must wrest from it a place for the glorification of their students and their forebears” (p. 301).

² I shall capitalize “Discourse” here to maintain consistency with Gee and Delpit.

In addition to tempering our institutions' Discourse to be more inclusive and less alienating, we also recognize and honor the value of students' own linguistic and cultural heritages, as Delpit (1992) notes: "I believe today's teachers can help economically disenfranchised students and students-of-color both to acquire the dominant Discourses and to transform them. ... Teachers must acknowledge and validate students' home language without using it to limit students' potential" (301). We can do so naturally, but by no means exclusively, with ePortfolios. Moreover, if we also find ways for students to engage one another in their own idioms (one potential limitation of ePortfolios is that they tend to be shared only with the teacher[s], but they can be shared with others as part of a learning community), they can begin to bridge diverse communication styles, which often represent a significant classroom challenge (Ladson-Billings, 1996).

Power to the People: Diversity and Democracy

Gay (1997) reminds us that, as Pai (1990) has pointed out, "students, like the populous [*sic*] of society in general, are highly pluralistic, and the educational process is, by nature, a sociocultural process" (p. 6). We cannot hope to make our society more equitable and to foster justice without reforming our institutions of higher education to be more inclusive and more reflective of the diverse communities from which our students come. It is not enough to improve the matriculation and persistence rates of students of color and from other less-advantaged backgrounds; we must design and implement pedagogies that foster the development of critical thinking, social analysis, and communication skills and ethical orientation among all of our students. Insofar as each of us is implicated in a powerful social institution—higher education—that bureaucratically and mostly unintentionally perpetuates Eurocentric and socioeconomically biased inequities, we must collectively seek to reform our

own institutions while recognizing that our halls and classrooms are not the only spaces our students inhabit. “As we seek to institutionalize our commitments to a purposeful university,” writes Delpit (2012), “I believe we must establish an overall plan to engage ourselves with each other, with our students, and with our community” (p. 8).

We can help students capitalize on their individual skills, knowledge, and experiences only if we explicitly shift our own focus from a campus-centric orientation to a holistic, learner-centered one. If we continue to privilege our own institutions, we will unwittingly perpetuate the unearned privilege accruing to students with the demographic backgrounds (e.g., higher socioeconomic status; skin color that matches the white phenotype pervading most campuses, especially among faculty and administration; family members who have attended college and can provide advice and mentoring; etc.) that make it easier to spend more time and effort on campus. Moreover, by honoring the numerous, interwoven communities in which our students live and learn, our institutions can take a great stride toward social justice.

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