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## The Student Centered Approach Storied: What Students Have to Teach Us

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## METHODS

# The Student-Centered Approach Storied: What Students Have to Teach Us

TAYLOR NORMAN

In some of my most haunting teacher-dreams, I look into blank stares. Or the classroom suffers from a deafening silence. Or the students' bodies speak only in confusion, uncertainty, and doubt. These dreams arise when I am planning a unit centered on students rather than content. Fearful of the failure that might happen while introducing classroom assignments that are open-ended, assignments that have no attached rubric, assignments that are worthy because they ask the students to be present, participatory, and reflective, I nervously begin to criticize my decision to teach *fill-in-the-blank* with a student centered approach.

This angst is intriguing because I practice educational theories that invite student experience and interest into instructional strategies (Aubrey & Riley, 2016). I practice theories that suggest teachers should teach through empathic practices and critical exposures of diversity and community (Alsup, 2013; Freire, 1970; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2008). I expose students to content that will disrupt their normal, push them into the "third space", and encourage dialectical discourse (Bakhtin, 1981; Bhabha, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008). I use student centered theories to create coursework that is culturally responsive (Gay, 2010). Yet with all the theoretical knowledge I can muster, the fear of crossing a tight-rope without a safety net is still palpable every time I present something to students that will center on their interests.

This net is held steady by rules, regulations, and rubrics. In today's age of public education, teachers are not encouraged to think of creative ways to present and assess content. Teachers are, instead, mandated to follow curricula that aims to mimic content knowledge (Ravitch, 2014). They are expected to distribute facts that can be reproduced on the corporation's graduation qualification exam. Therefore, in an educational system that holds quantitative data to a higher standard than qualitative knowledge, bringing a student centered approach to life is a precarious thing. However, it is not impossible.

### Student Centered is Culturally Responsive

Teachers who design coursework loaded with student interest, intellect, and experience practice the student centered approach proposed by John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Jean Piaget (Aubrey & Riley, 2016). I assert that centering content in this way has the potential to perpetuate a culturally responsive praxis. Theoretically, culturally responsive teaching advocates for instructional strategies that utilize student values, attitudes, beliefs, customs, traditions, heritages, experiences, and perspectives when planning course content (Gay, 2010; Ford & Kea, 2009). By modifying the student centered approach with a culturally responsive lens, teachers actively observe their students in order to design coursework responsive to both the curricular demands and the classroom's organized culture.

The student centered culturally responsive classroom is a space furnished by the identities of its learners and the elements of its content. In order to create this classroom, students will need to be taught the demands and expectations of a classroom centered on their learning. Likewise, teachers will need to learn how they plan to facilitate and manage their students' learning. A teacher's silence is critical when managing and facilitating a student centered culturally responsive classroom. We have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Listen to the students. They talk all the time. They narrate their personal and cultural identities. Use think-pair-share sessions as observational evidence of student interests to be applied to the next curricular expectation.

Silence has another function in the student centered culturally responsive classroom. Finding comfort in silence will make for a more student-centered discussion. Students need time to think. They also need time to organize their thoughts. If teachers can wait long enough, if they can refuse encouraging hints, if they can sit in the uncomfortable silence of uncertainty, then students find their voices, and they use them. Furthermore, student centered culturally responsive classrooms require teachers to use creative forms of assessment. Miller (2013) suggests grading a student's

whole project. Rather than hen-pecking students with grades, learn which grades can be avoided and remove them from the gradebook. Take those avoidable grades and workshop them as a learning community, peer-edit those rough drafts, conference with students about their revision process, etc.

Student centered culturally responsive classrooms give students the opportunity to produce classwork that has both depth and breadth. Coursework that trusts the students' authentic learning processes as opposed to coursework that simply mimics course content. To achieve a classroom that is competent enough to think for itself, teachers must begin by building a communal space filled with individuals who learn concurrently. In silence, teachers manage the students' progression while facilitating their learning. In creativity, teachers assess their students for the mastery of skills. In trust, students and teachers complete the coursework with a holistic understanding of its overall, academic purpose.

### Pedagogical Stories

A pedagogical story is a narrative about classroom instruction. It tells of the symbiotic relationship shared between teacher and student dependent on academic achievement. I share pedagogical stories to inform the collective practice of teaching. Together, stories of classroom experiences speak in one voice (Coles, 2004). One voice that tells preservice teachers what they might encounter when applying their learned theories to classroom practice; one that stories classroom situations that inform theory with practice. The stories below hope to inform my meaning of a student centered culturally responsive classroom..

Because it is that "personal stories of practice move understanding of concepts and principles beyond cognition to embrace the psychoemotional energy, the exuberance, and the ethical convictions that are embedded in all good teaching", I tell these stories to push forward practice and its theoretical implications (Gay, 2010, p. 215).

I barely remember the interview. I know there was a principal and a department head somewhere among the shadowed heads, cloaked in darkness cast from the overhead projector. This was the first place I formally used the term "student centered teaching." I vividly remember that word and *differentiation*. Those were my interview words, and even through a dry mouth, I remembered to verbally vomit them somewhere. They were probably used out of context.

I found slots for these words in my classroom after I began to build a practical understanding of the educational philosophies I read about in college. This understanding has multiple layers cross-listed among multiple dimensions. Edu-

cational philosophies could never prepare a new teacher for teaching's human condition. That's why there are so many philosophies, because there are so many conditions and experiences philosophy has to situate.

I read somewhere that a teacher answers 200 questions a day. Teacher response to these questions is the matting ritual of a new school year. Students find out each teacher's propensity for bathroom visits, screen-time, tardies, etc. These questions teach me about the community I serve. They offer me insight to the character of my students, individually and collectively. I use these questions to my advantage. I use them to create a student centered environment.

By giving and taking (quite frequently, as a democratic process) at a fair distribution, the power in a classroom is shown to be shared. This shared environment taught both me and them about how we defined ourselves and what purpose the content had in our lives. I defined myself as a middle-class, white, suburban, white-collar, Midwestern woman; they defined themselves as a lower-class, white, rural, blue-collar, Midwestern population. The purpose of the content I was teaching, according to me, was detrimental. To them, it was benign. And although we looked alike, we were not alike. I was raised in a culture that identified success with college. College was the solution to an otherwise daunting life. With a college degree, anything was achievable. I swallowed this whole. Once a college student, I feel deeply in love with learning. I pursued a career in education because of it. I learned within weeks of my first semester as a teacher that where my community instilled college and higher education, this community had instilled something else.

I began to think about the stories we read as preservice teachers. The ones about responding as a stranger in a strange land. We read them to reflect on enacting a similar situation. What would it feel like to teach students different from us? How would we respond if we were the minority in our classrooms? How would we help a student who was different from or new to our classrooms? I did not imagine I would need these ideas when I first approached my students. I thought because we looked alike our interests would align with each other. When they didn't, I would go back to assignments and make notes of the students' reactions. I would use these notes to better plan material for the next school year. This is how I have come to understand my early practice. I

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reflected upon all assignments. I worked to better them based on student interest and experience. I began to choose content that was in response to the students' community. And the students became mentally present and participatory. It had come full circle. The term I spat out at my interview was here, functioning, in my classroom. This student centered approach gave me the wherewithal to listen to my students. And this active listening taught me how to interest them with content that was responsive to their culture.

In language arts courses, this can be performed through the simple act of choosing a piece of literature that responds to the culture of its learning community. Fiction, specifically, enables students to respond to experience in a situated way. Through reader response, students are given the opportunity to interpret their identity as well as their social environment by way of virtual experience. If the texts are chosen with their interest in mind, then students are able to have a virtual experience with a story that explores their understanding of who they are and how they belong to their community.

Because it is a practice in language arts departments that the available texts are approved by a higher authority and listed on the formal curricula, teachers have a regulated range of choice when looking for fiction to share with their students. These texts are commonly held in a room poignantly called "the book room." Knowing these texts and their purpose in the overall curriculum affords teachers the right to criticize their worth. This criticism can be used one of two ways, the teacher can either use or not use the texts. When teachers decide not to use the texts, a mini book adoption happens.

A book adoption is the process by which course textbooks become a part of school curricula. Committees gather to review and revise each curriculum. During these committee meetings teachers specific to the curriculum-at-hand review the state and/or federal standards. Revisions are made to the curriculum based on this review process. Texts are brought forth by committee members. In some sort of report, similar to an annotated bibliography, teachers recommend effective texts based on their worth in teaching the skills mentioned on the curriculum. This formal process is a large overhaul. But like I said, that is for course textbooks. There is little teachers can do about those textbooks. They have to be used because they are the texts the students pay for in their book rental fee. Yet, this is only one type of text offered in a language arts department. The other type is found on the curricula that teaches literary theory and its acquired skills. These texts are recommended and vary in genre, style, and purpose. These recommended texts can give teachers a bit of wiggle room when looking for literature that adheres to the students' interests. If the skill a teacher is trying to teach is not addressed

in any of the literature on the list, a mini book adoption occurs.

Like the larger adoption, to add a text to a recommended list takes some reporting. Teachers must present cases to department heads, academic deans, and/or the school board. These cases are heard and a choice is made about the book. While I was working as a high school language arts teacher, I found it necessary to criticize the book room for reasons that were (1) student centered and (2) culturally responsive. In the first story, the criticism is founded on supply; in the second story, it is founded on demand. In one, the students are labeled as basic, and the other, they are academic. In both, we are a learning community working to create a literate stance on language and literature.

1. I taught Basic ten. This meant that I taught the students who needed the basic skills and concepts associated with the grade ten language arts standards. Because of this, the curriculum guide I received was slim. So slim that one semester it caused me trouble. Never had it before, but one semester I had a group of Basic 10 students who did not perform well in large group discussions. It was as if their bodies would not allow them to sit still in a desk and listen to the comments others contributed to class discussion. As they would stand, sit, kneel, twitch, and gesture, they would curse, touch, interrupt, and disrespect their fellow classmates. No one student was responsible. It was all of them.

When looking at text complexity with the Basic 10 students, they commonly responded well to two of the recommended texts, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Kaye Gibbons' *Ellen Foster*. Yet even after the use of Steinbeck's novel, this specific group had the above response. I stopped what I was doing. I listened to their words and their bodies. I heard them asking for a break. A break from traditional schooling, from me, and from each other. Thinking about how to heed this request, I went into the book room. I thought I might be able to compose a varied book list and do literature circles with the selected books. This would attend to the diversity of the group and the skills expected by the standards. I could fold writing process and grammar instruction into the context of each book.

This would have worked. It would have been a way to manage and facilitate their learning of text complexity without the large group discussion. But it didn't work. There were not enough books associated with this group of students in the book room. Therefore, I went back to the proverbial drawing board. I had to find more books, but I did not have time to perform the formal book adoption process. I sat from my desk one day, pondering this revision and watching these students read the books they had chosen for silent

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reading time. I liked to watch this group sit quietly. It was so calming; it was obvious they enjoyed time to themselves. It was then that I realized they *liked* to read alone.

Eventually, the literature circle idea turned into an individually-run project composed by each student on a self-selected novel. As a class, we spent 15 minutes on mini-lessons about the day's objectives and 35 minutes performing the day's objectives. Day one, I modeled researching texts within a genre search in the 15-minute mini-lesson. For the last 35 minutes, they read about different books on the internet and wrote an annotated list of three choices. Day two, we continued research and annotations for the first 35 minutes, then a 15-minute large group discussion about book choice. The days progress like that, a little bit of learning together and a lot of learning alone.

And they sat still. They worked. They learned about character, setting, and theme. They learned about tone, dialect, and author's purpose. They learned new vocabulary in a daily vocabulary journal. At the end of the unit, the students were able to assemble a cohesive look at the concepts they learned with respect to their novels. They provided their understanding of literary concepts. They defined and used all the new vocabulary they learned. They wrote letters to the authors expressing their concerns and recommendations for the novel. They peer-edited those letters. Finally, they presented book reviews to the class—these were a bit more stressful, but we pulled it off.

2. I waited a couple of years for my first Academic 11. This meant that I taught American literature to grade 11 students who were college-bound. Because of this, the curriculum guide I received was filled to the brim with ideas. With a wide scope of literature to choose from and the broad purpose of learning literary criticism, I was excited to flex my unit-planning muscles. In the second semester of this curriculum, teachers were to pick one American novel to analyze its form, function, and purpose in terms of American history and its specific literary movements.

There were books by Willa Cather and F. Scott Fitzgerald, by John Steinbeck and William Faulkner. Many of the teachers in my department gave the students Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Although I appreciate Twain's contribution to American literature, his short stories teach similar lessons. After reviewing the books in the book room, I finally decided to use Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*. I wanted to talk to these students about race relations. And the Jim Crow south. And educational segregation. I wanted them to learn about their white privilege. I wanted to push them into their third space, exchanging stories of cultural capital.

They, however, did not want to learn about any of these things. In fact, they were even skeptical of there being any

consequences for Jim Crow. I remember them saying, "Look, Norman, we are about to have a black president—can't you see, we are passed all this stuff;" "Yeah, for real, no one even thinks about race anymore," and the infamous "I don't see color." The work the students presented me regarding the book was good enough for the points it was awarded. Yet with this book the big lessons about culturally identifying with story or analyzing social commentary through literature were lost on these students.

I was disappointed the unit floundered. I spent the rest of the semester using poetry, short stories, and drama to teach cultural identity and social commentary. I wrestled with what to do the next year. I knew I would have to choose a different book, and I would have to figure that out sooner rather than later. An entire unit-plan on a novel takes a massive amount of planning, especially if I needed the time to add a book to the book room. Again, I went back to the proverbial drawing board, and began with simply reading the recommended texts associated with the Academic 11 curriculum.

Nothing really struck me. I could not find a representation of a set of characters that I believed would appeal to the students as I knew them. I knew it was imperative that I find a novel without an explicit rural identity. Students in this community had a rural identity that was characteristic to its surroundings. They fought against representations of rurality that were "not real". Off of the recommended text list and in my own research, I stumbled into the muckracking texts. I found Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and came to a solution. Sinclair's Lithuanian immigrants were similarly different from my students. Although they were strangers in a foreign land, these characters were doing jobs many of the students performed.

Sinclair told of the working men and women in the Chicago stockyards. These people were regularly mistreated at work, scammed by the system, and desperately wanted to spend their free time with friends and family. This was my learning community. They worked hard to get and keep what they owned, and they looked forward to spending Sunday afternoons at large family barbeques. These students saw their community as Sinclair's, a community populated with working men and women. What Sinclair's immigrants added to their response was a cultural awareness. Students started to notice that immigrant relations today may have improved, but only by a small measure.

Here is where the students got to present debates on race relations, cultural capital, and privilege. Here is where the students wrote reader response essays about the novel's representation of American immigration. Using workshops, the students developed essays that were critical and smart. They, proud of what they had accomplished, asked to pres-



ent their claims about Sinclair's America and their America. Within one unit, writing skills were advanced, reading skills were advanced; and because the students felt the need for it, speaking and listening skills got a nice drum-roll end.

## Conclusion

A teaching practice gone stagnant is a rancid thing for students to consume. The student centered culturally responsive classroom inquires, reviews, and revises coursework in order to gauge its goodness. The two stories above inform this claim. They highlight where I inquired, reviewed, and revised my coursework for the sake of its goodness. I made and remade my choices about the literature I used for the sake of my learners. Settling on choices that were centered on my students and responsive to the classroom's organized culture, I was able to facilitate classroom learning that was effective and timely. Classroom learning that taught the content knowledge the education department mandated as well as the critical consciousness my teacher education program urged. For this article, I went back and reviewed the seminar papers from the Dartmouth conference in 1966. These papers, authored by leading English education scholars, suggest that English teachers should appeal to students' socioemotional needs (Squire, 1968). They should distribute content that is ever-evolving, rather than deposit content that is static (Britton, 1968). Teaching the same piece of literature and perpetuating the same literary responses year after year is not what the past generation of English educators wanted for the future of English education. Even if the Department of Education mandates that teachers must teach the same coursework year after year, teachers must not lose the autonomy lesson planning grants them. That coursework can be taught differently each year if the teacher's classroom is both culturally responsive and student centered.

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