

CENTEREDNESS OF EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract: *In this paper, we are going to present the most representative features of the teacher centered learning, where the teacher is considered to be the only reliable source of information and concentrates the entire power in his/her hands. They are presented versus the features of student centered learning, where students may choose their subjects; students are active participants during the learning process; power belongs mainly to students; students talk as much as the teacher during the class; students may use teaching aids, etc. We have identified the causes for which student centered learning has not been extensively introduced in the American public school.*

Key words: *behaviour, education, learning, student centred learning, teacher centred learning.*

1. Introduction

School must endow students with a certain behavior and learning techniques while at the same time fulfilling social and economic needs. In his work, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms (1890 - 1980)*, Larry Cuban (1984) discusses teacher-centered versus student-centered learning.

In teacher-centered learning, the teacher is the one who dominates the verbal exchanges in the act of teaching. His/her voice is dominant. Teaching is for the whole class. The teacher is the one who manages the time required for each stage of teaching and students are seated in front of him/her in rows of desks. On the other hand, Cuban describes student-centered learning, where the student speaks as much as the teacher in class, teaching is delivered individually or for small groups, students participate in class management and teaching aids are available for all of them (Cuban, 1984).

2. Student-centered education/ Teacher-centered education. Dualism or Continuum

The term 'student-centered education' is frequently used in pedagogical literature. Given the demographic explosion of the school population and the consumer culture centered on the customer, contemporary society offers a climate in which student-centered education is a phrase increasingly used. The concept of student-centered education dates back to 1905 in Hayward and 1956 in Dewey's work. Interpretation varies from one author to another. Some consider it as the equivalent of an active learning; others define it in a more comprehensive way, considering it an active learning,

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learning choice, the shift in power relations between in the teacher and the student. The term is often used in specialized literature as well as politics, but unfortunately it has been transferred into practice only to a small extent. Student-centered education has been seen globally as a positive experience. For example, R. Edwards highlights the importance of student-centered education: ‘Placing learners at the heart of the learning process and meeting their needs is taken to a progressive step in which learner-centered approaches mean that persons are able to learn what is relevant for them in ways that are appropriate. Waste in human and educational resources is reduced as it suggested learners no longer have to learn what they already know or can do, nor what they are uninterested in’ (Edwards, 2001).

D. Kember (1997) considered that in student-centered education, the teacher only facilitated learning and is not an information presenter. C.R. Rogers (1983) identified the necessary condition that the teacher must accomplish in order to ensure a student-centered education: ‘A leader or person who is perceived as an authority figure in the situation, is sufficiently secure within herself (himself) and her (his) relationship to others, that she (he) experiences an essential trust in the capacity of others to think for themselves, to learn for themselves (Kember, 1997). In Rogers’ view, student-centered education does not mean only the freedom of choosing what they want to study, but to know also how and why a particular subject satisfies their learning interest.

In R.M. Harden and J. Crosby’s vision (2000), teacher-centered education is based on learning strategies focused on transmitting knowledge from expert to novice, while student-centered education, in contrast, is focused on what students do to learn and not on what the teacher does. S.J. Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) summarizes the main principles of student-centered education. It is an active learning and not a passive one, which is based on profound understanding in which the student’s responsibility is much higher. It confers autonomy to students, but implies an interdependent teacher - student relationship, mutual respect and a reflexive approach to the learning process from both students and teacher.

Education is often presented as a dichotomy between student-centered education and teacher-centered education. In reality, the two forms cannot be seen as totally separate. In fact, these terms, in Geraldine O’Neil and Tim McMahon’s (2005) opinion, are rather a continuum that will be presented in the following figure:

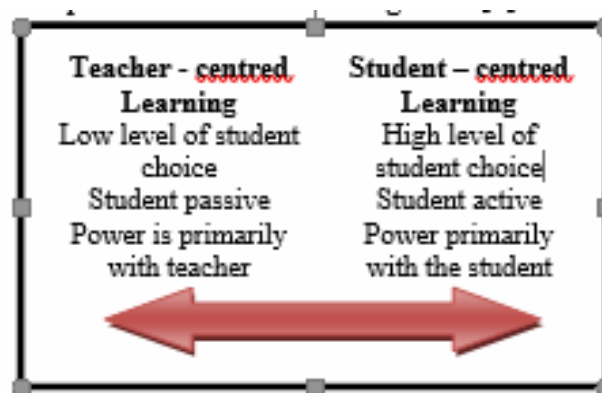


Fig. 1. *Student-centered education and teacher-centered education continuum*

The manner, in which student-centered education is applied in practice, depends on the manner in which we look at this continuum in various learning contexts. University of Glasgow has identified four main strategies of applying it. The first strategy consists in convincing the student to become more active in acquiring competencies, including class exercises, experiments, learning assisted by computer, and so on. The second strategy is to make students more aware of what they have to do and their reasons for learning. The third strategy is focused on interaction, including here tutorials and group discussions, and the final strategy is focused on transferable skills.

2.1. Attempts to impose a student-centered instruction in American Public Schools

Cuban (1984) described several attempts to implement reform in public schools before 1940.

In 1934, schools in New York began to experiment with the Activity program, which suggested that students and teachers should work together for choosing subjects, and teaching and learning activities should be centered on students' needs and interests. In addition, the school timetable had to be flexible, and teacher's exposure replaced by trips, research work, case dramatization (Cuban, 1984). Discipline was replaced by self-control. Between 1920 and 1940 Denver schools introduced a reform based on student-centered instruction. Beside the Activity program provided by New York schools, the projects method was introduced there which involved the students' participation, both individually and in groups.

Assessing the effects of this reform, Cuban found that only 20% of schools had applied extensively the student-centered instruction. In general, he considered that reform in that period did not bring significant changes in methods of instruction because of the structure and organization of schools. After World War II, student-centered education is considered responsible for the deterioration of academic standards; good academic standards were required in order to win the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Student-centered education was considered as anti-intellectual. Towards the end of the 1960s, an increasing number of alternative private schools came into being, and instruction became student centered.

In public schools, an important attempt to introduce student-centered instruction was The Open Classroom. It was based on active learning, as opposed to the passive one. The student coordinated the process of learning alone, and it was not imposed by the teacher. Classrooms were large, with open spaces, divided into learning centers. Each learning center contained a variety of teaching aids. Students had to plan their process of learning. The open classroom offered individual training and the possibility to choose between different learning centers, much bigger than a traditional classroom. Students moved from a learning center to another depending on their desire and individual ability to learn. For example, a center was for reading, another for sciences, etc.

During the 1970s, new student-centered methods appeared, based on the critical pedagogy work written by the Brazilian pedagogue and philosopher Paulo Freire. His book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is a methodology to educate people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Freire, 1970). Freire is considered a Reconstructionist, who wants to reform society. Most educational systems, in his opinion, try to integrate the disadvantaged people in the social system, a system which actually oppresses them. Freire's methodology helps people understand the economic and

political forces that determine the social structure and prepares them to fight for changing the society.

These methods help individuals to understand the world they live in. For example, a group of students were shown an image of a common scene in their life. Through discussion, the students begin to differentiate the elements of the scene. Discussion therefore results in the students' critical awareness of political and social forces. Also, the words used by participants to describe the scene become the basis of development for reading material. The teacher plays an important role in choosing the problem situation/scene. This should be representative of students' realities and present aspects of their daily lives. Teachers and students will engage in a dialogue about these problems, from which keywords will be detached, words which students use to describe their lives. These words are the basis of teaching reading. In this way, there is a direct link between learning how to read and learning how to think.

To start this process, teachers must investigate students' lives. The purpose of this investigation is to discover themes in their lives which may be used to open a dialogue based on the problem-posing. Teachers should observe the manner in which people talk, their behavior and, in general, the social life of the given community. In the initial phase of this process, teachers record a series of observations and then compare them. They are aware of social conditions and of how students perceive the world. In all Freirian dialogues, learning is done on different levels. At one level they learn about the world, at another level they learn how they should think about the world and finally they become aware of why they should think about the world in that way. Freire calls this process, reflection (Freire, 1970).

Reflection involves thinking about the consequences of our actions and about the reason for which we have thought in some way (Freire, 1970). For example, it is a choice to act in a certain way. That action will have an effect on the world, then the person can reflect on the impact of that choice and why he decided upon that choice and not another one. This process will affect the next choices which, in turn, may become objects of reflection. Since teachers go through this process of reflection on their observations, they identify contradictions in students' life, which may be used then in dialogues.

Freire called codification, such as sketches, photos, dramatizations, recordings. Codifications should reflect participants' real life, so that they can recognize the situations described in them. Also, they should not be totally explicit or totally obscure. An ideal consequence is that codifications will trigger a dialogue that will lead to other topics from students' lives (Freire, 1970). The purpose of codification is to show them a representation of their lives for starting a dialogue. For example, the problem of alcoholism may be codified by the image of a drunken man who staggers and other people talking in the corners. Most people live in a culture of silence.

Living in a culture of silence, people do not make their lives an object of reflection. They just act without thinking about the causes of their actions. In Freire's opinion 'they are dehumanized. They are objects of history as opposed to being subjects of history. They do not make history; history makes them' (Freire, 1970). Many people live in a culture of silence and do not consider their lives a subject of discussion. In codification, in the case of the drunken man for instance, the teacher should not assume the fact that he might have known the reality. He must start from the premise that the man is drunk because of a vice. In the current dialogue, the investigator who has selected codification made it because he has identified alcoholism as a

community problem. Man drinks because of his worries, low pay, and inability to support his family. Freire believes that the presentation of codifications determines students to explain their consciousness about the world. Students see how it works, while examining a situation which has been experienced. Analysis forces them to change their perception upon their own actions.

This creates new perceptions and develops new knowledge. After the dialogue on the codification of alcoholic behavior, students may perceive the drunken man's actions as a consequence of economic conditions. Their perception on the causes of alcoholism will be fundamentally changed. Students will reflect on their previous knowledge and perceptions.

Freire describes this process as a 'perception of the previous perception' and 'knowledge of the previous knowledge' (Freire, 1970). In other words, students will reflect on the fact that they have thought so little about the causes of alcoholism. From the process of codification and dialogue, generative words appear which may be used then for teaching reading. These generative words must have pragmatic value and help participants eliminate the culture of silence. Generative words are words which participants use to describe reality. In the dialogue about drunk man on the street, teachers may use for reading purpose words like: drunk, street, walking, working conditions, wages, family and after that more elaborated words may be introduced like: alcoholism, exploitation, economy, employment, unemployment.

During learning, these words help develop students' conscience. They embody persons' actions. Reading or writing about someone's actions is a process of objectification. In this process, a person is reflecting on the action embodied by that word. This reflective process may transform the person's next choices. For example, if a person learns the words 'drunk, low wage, family,' he/she is engaged in a dialogue about the causes of alcoholism and, later, will think that alcoholism is a result of poor remuneration, or of precarious life conditions.

These thoughts will determine their future actions, and people, at least so Freire believes, decide to engage themselves in political actions which will eliminate the social causes of alcoholism. In other words, they will be engaged in reconstruction of the world.

Reflecting on the problem, participants will have to look for the previous causes which they were not aware of that alcoholism is induced by economic and social causes and why they have never fought to change these conditions.

Freire (1970) identifies five stages in the dialogue about codification:

- in the first stage, students describe what they see in the picture;
- in the second phase, the teacher selects certain problems related to the codified presentation. The stage of problem-posing helps students see their life as an object that may be discussed and as something which may be changed;
- in the third stage, students reflect on their previously silent status;
- in the fourth stage, participants demonstrate critical awareness and understand how their lives and their thinking is shaped by political and economic circumstances;
- in the fifth stage, they eliminate the influence of what has controlled them, in Freire's terms the 'oppressor' from their minds.

Open classrooms and critical pedagogy lost their importance by the mid-1970s, when attention shifted towards traditional subjects and discipline. Instruction based on competencies began to replace the open classrooms.

3. Conclusion: The modest success of introducing student - centered instruction in public schools

Cuban (1984) shows that along the history of education, the attempts to impose a student-centered learning have achieved modest success. Education focused on social efficiency imposed upon a teacher-centered learning.

Cuban shows that along the history of education, the attempts to impose a student-centered instruction have achieved modest success. At the beginning of the century, school administrators had a mania for bureaucratic efficiency; schools were seen as enterprises and focused on standards and instruction. There was also a hierarchy of top-to-bottom chains of command, which meant that administrators prevailed over teachers, and teachers prevailed over students.

Supporters of student-centered learning, led by John Dewey, began to make pressures for introducing reforms in public schools. These reforms met with resistance from the organizational structure of these schools, but they were successfully implemented in private schools. In the instruction based on competencies, the teacher sets out the objectives and develops methods for achieving them. Also, he/she quantifies in what measure objectives are accomplished. Students gain specific competencies along previously planned stages. The importance of assessment will lead to an increasing importance of standardized tests, these tests having control function upon students and teachers' activities.

This was based on Skinner's behaviorist theories. Behaviorism is a very mechanistic model, a concept of teaching based on measuring and testing to determine deficiencies and achievements and to teach specific objectives. Skinner tried to apply behaviorism in schools using programmed learning machines. Based on the principles of behaviorism, machines had to train students by showing small units of information and providing a repetition, an update and constant reinforcement of them. Skinner's theories became a support for what Ira Shore called the Conservative Restoration of the 1970s (Shor, 1972). How conservative or liberal policies influence student-centered education or teacher-centered education is a mechanism on which it is important for us to look for.

Generally speaking, conservatives have rejected the idea of student-centered education in favor of traditional teacher-centered education. Education based on the child's interest and freedom of choice was considered anti-intellectual. Since the 1970s, excellence, standards, discipline, and homework have become the major concerns of conservative politics.

On the other hand, democrats believe that training should be focused on the student's needs and interests. They argue, as John Dewey did, that the rigid procedures applied in classrooms educate students to receive orders and to be passive participants in a democratic society. They intend to reject excellence in favor of equal educational opportunity and want the students to be evaluated according to their own interests and skills. Conservatives want assessment to rely on absolute standards, and students to be evaluated with letters, each corresponding to certain standards, while Democrats want qualifications to register the progress of each individual student. At the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, we have noticed the appearance of open

classrooms, based on the idea that class management should be organized according to children's development and interests. Open classrooms were operating in John Dewey's progressive tradition.

The method was based on Jean Piaget's psychological theories. He claimed that instruction should take into account each stage of the child's development. He did an elaborated analysis of the way in which each stage of development corresponds to the child's cognitive capacities of understanding different concepts. An important part of this theory has been used in active learning. In the early 1970s, the open classrooms idea became widespread. Elementary schools were built with open spaces to correspond to this type of class organization. Towards the end of 1970, the concept lost popularity and many of those classrooms were divided into traditional classrooms.

At the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, the basic principles of Skinner's learning machine were incorporated into many educational software programs for microcomputers. Like any other behaviorist forms, education based on competencies uses a mechanical model of learning and tends to exercise a direct control over students' behavior.

Cuban (1984) believes that student-centered instruction had no major impact on American public schools, because of the teachers' conservative culture and because schools were still interested, in his view, in social control and selection. Education based on students' interests is contrary to the idea that the school serves political and economic interests, and he has brought into light the political nature of class instruction. All these reasons are responsible for the very little change in methods of instruction in the twentieth century.

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