The Centre Cannot Hold: Challenging Student-centred Learning

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Abstract

In this paper we wish to express our discomfort with some interpretations of student-centredness in third-level education, and the way that such interpretations may reify the student to an extent that disciplinary knowledge suffers.
1. Student-centredness

The term ‘student-centredness’ became prominent in the pedagogical literature from the 1980s onwards, with a plethora of literature emphasising particular understandings of the term some of them quite contradictory. A perverse example was offered by Tara Brabazon, Professor of Media Studies in the University of Brighton:

I was recently told of a dean who wanted to reduce teaching costs and thought moving towards student-centredness would achieve this. He believed that if students were doing more work on their own, less face-to-face teaching would be needed, meaning academics would have more time to spend on research (Gill:2008:34).

The above quote comes from a major THE (Times Higher Education) feature article on student-centred learning entitled ‘A matter of opinion’ (Gill 2008: 30-35). Commenting online on this article, a number of correspondents (Caravaggio and Ed, THE online 2009) have pointed out the lack of consensus on exactly what constitutes student-centred learning.

One attempt by Lea to define ‘student-centredness’ encompasses the following tenets:

1. A reliance on active rather than passive learning.
2. The emphasis on deep learning and understanding.
3. Increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student.
4. An increased sense of autonomy in the learner.
5. An interdependence between teacher and learner.
6. A mutual respect within the teacher-learner relationship.

Gill (2008) adds an eighth: that ‘[…] students’ opinions and their articulation are central to this approach’ (Gill 2008:31).

We wish to make it clear that we endorse many of these tenets. Few educationalists would wish to return to didactic and prescriptive teaching methods, where the student becomes merely a passive recipient of information. Nor would we take issue with the concept of learner autonomy, responsibility or reflexivity. However we wish to critique a number of the implications drawn too readily from the psychology underlying student-centred learning. This can be elucidated when we examine the key authors associated with the concept of student-centred learning.

2. Constructivist underpinning

The most important psychological principle underlying student-centredness derives from what has been called ‘trivial constructivism’ – the term ‘trivial’ here, rather than implying insignificant or unimportant, means ‘obvious’. It indicates the view that learners actively create knowledge in their efforts to understand the world (Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008:56). Accordingly, learners construct mental models drawn from their own experience, and to which new knowledge is
adapted. This view is most strongly associated with the work of Piaget and his theory of children’s cognitive development. Piaget claims that learners themselves must go through the process of reconfiguring their own mental constructs, and teachers should not interfere by imposing their own or traditional solutions to problems, which learners may accept without assimilation (Piaget, 1972).

Two aspects of Piaget’s views have become closely, and perhaps naively, associated with student-centredness:

1. Everyone constructs their own world-view;
2. Teachers who impose their own perceptions on learners are a hindrance to learning.

This leads to the view that the critical distinction is that between student-centredness and teacher-centredness, but we argue below that the distinction is often fought on the grounds of student-centredness versus knowledge-centredness. Seen in this light, the case for student-centredness is not so obvious.

3. Personal world view construction

The claim that everyone constructs their own world-view is challenged by Simon who states that if each learner requires a specific pedagogical approach ‘appropriate to him or her and to no other, then the construction of an all-embracing pedagogy or general principles of teaching becomes an impossibility’ (in O’Neill and McMahon 2005:33). A naïve constructivism assumes a solipsistic and individualistic view of the world in which social learning processes are downplayed. In practice we suspect that this does not happen, and that teachers make well-merited assumptions that we all share common understandings of the world, though these run alongside individual perceptions, attitudes and emotions drawn from experience. An emerging trend in modern educational theory and practice is a move away from a Western emphasis on individualistic psychology in favour of a concern for social groups and the concept of learning as a socio-cultural activity. The view of learning as highly individualistic may also reflect a cultural form of Western educational imperialism. Other regions of the world, and particularly Confucian heritage cultures (CHC) may be more concerned with social relationships and processes in learning, and the transmission of valued cultural knowledge from experts and elders to learners and novice members of the society.

As we suggest above, this view of student-centred learning lies in some educationalists’ unconsidered beliefs in a naïve and perhaps outdated primitive constructivism though happily this does not always translate into practice.

4. Educational discourse

The adoption of the modern and politically-correct term ‘learning’, as opposed to ‘education’ or ‘teaching’ which has come to suggest disempowering old-fashioned didactic pedagogies, should be noted. ‘Student-centred learning’ is of course a tautology, since what else could learning be, but centred on the learner? Moreover, as Alan Ryan, Warden of New College Oxford states,

If teaching isn’t student-centred, what is it […] who are you supposed to teach, if not the students? What you have is a triadic relationship; one end is anchored by the students, and one end by the teacher, and the third bit, which people are often slow to think carefully about, is anchored by the discipline. There is something that constitutes
an academic subject or skill to be mastered. The notion that it can be purely about a
teacher’s skills makes no sense, nor does the idea that it can be solely about the
students (Gill:2008:33).

Frank Furedi, Professor of Sociology in the University of Kent has noted similar linguistic trends in
general educational discourse; for example:

• the downplaying of the term ‘education’ in recent UK policy documents on post-compulsory
education

• a re-branding of all personal and academic attributes as ‘skills;

• the elevation of everyday routine learning from experience into ‘experiential learning’, to be
accredited or even prioritised over formal learning

• the term ‘formal learning’ or ‘formal education’ as pejorative terms to be opposed by the more
valued ‘informal learning (Furedi: 2009:1-12).

It is perceived as incorrect in current curriculum practice to have as an aim the ‘transmission of
knowledge’, which suggests an obsolete traditional didactic model.

5. Knowledge as a hindrance to learning

Within Frank Furedi’s forthcoming book, a chapter entitled ‘The loss of faith in education’ cites a
number of experts who claim that it is the old-fashioned knowledge-led curriculum itself that gets
in the way of student learning. For example, Sir Ken Robinson, an adviser to the UK government
on the development of creativity claims that ‘formal education is stifling the talents and abilities of
many […] killing their motivation to learn’ (Shepherd, 2009: 5). Bentley, another authority claims
‘we must not make the mistake of confusing school-based instruction with the whole of education;
it is only one site amongst many’ (Furedi: 2009).

Furedi notes the claim that the generic skill of ‘learning to learn’ is based on the frequently-cited
assumption that knowledge is rapidly outdated, so what students need is a set of functional skills to
prepare people for the future. Furedi argues that this obsession with functional skills turns
pedagogy into a sub-branch of management training. He counters this with the argument of the
radical Italian educationalist Gramsci, who claimed that education is a ‘struggle against folklore’
and is often at odds with the common-sense observations of everyday life (Furedi 2009). For
example much scientific knowledge is counter-intuitive - heavy objects may float and light ones
sink. For this reason, informal and everyday learning is not the same as formal learning, and
should not be accorded the same status.

6. Teachers as a hindrance to learning

The second author who was central to promoting the concept of student-centredness is Carl
Rogers the American psychotherapist who developed the concept of client-centred counselling,
and from this, a theory of learning derived from humanistic or person-centred psychology. His
claim, first made back in the 1950’s in his book Client-centred Therapy, is that ‘we cannot teach
another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning’ (Rogers 1951: 384-429). His view of
person-centred learning is more fully elucidated in his text Freedom to Learn (Rogers and Freiberg, 1993) which contains a comprehensive account of person-or student-centred learning.

Rogers' views have been enormously influential in all educational sectors. One of his most strongly endorsed claims is that the teacher should act primarily as a facilitator rather than as a disciplinary or subject expert. In fact she should de-emphasise content goals to focus on the experience of learning itself. Burnard, who took to heart Rogers' view that students' perceptions are of the foremost importance in learning, states that 'students might not only choose what to study, but how and why that topic might be an interesting one to study' (in O'Neill and McMahon 2005:28).

Those who argue for student-centred learning often juxtapose it with teacher-centred learning. They may cite extreme examples of eccentric teachers 'doing their own thing' at the expense of the subject and the student. But this is too easy a target and the learner-centred approach wins hands down. Furedi claims that the intellectual relationship between academics and students has been realigned to be more like that of a secondary school teacher and pupils, where the teachers acquiesce to students in the hope of engaging them.

7. Opinion-led pedagogy

Students' perceptions’ are often translated as meaning ‘student opinions’ about topics, but as Alan Ryan, cited above, points out:

Student-centred learning suggests that all opinions have equal value. The meta-argument of my teaching (he is a philosopher) is that opinions verified by research and reading are more valuable than views offered without research. (Gill:2008:33)

We go further, and in our teaching ban the use of the term ‘opinion’ in student argument and writing on the basis that knowledge is developed through claims, substantiated and evaluated by the quality of evidence. Otherwise students assume that everyone has opinions and these are of equal value (see Baxter Magolda 1992). David Knight, correspondent to the ‘Matter of opinions’ debate in the Times Higher Education (online) recounted his own experience of opinion-led teaching:

After I had been teaching adult learners social sciences for three months in a further education setting they'd been coming to for two years, they complained that they found it too difficult to write their own account of what had been discussed in class, and they complained I didn’t ask their opinions enough. All they wanted was to chat about the topics [...] Moreover, they wanted to be told what to write which is anathema to the student-centred approach. So they would write things which were factually incorrect and then get frustrated when their mistakes were pointed out to them. (Times Higher Education Online 2009)

While it is important for learner engagement that the content of learning is seen to be relevant and appropriate for them, in accordance with constructivist theory and pedagogical good practice, many of us would draw the line at unrestricted student choice where the popular may take precedence over the important. It is suitable for some learner groups, at some stages in their learning, for example in the choice of assessment methods, but in many disciplinary areas,
engineering, economics, genetics, for example, topics and tools which are difficult or not initially appealing may be necessary for subject mastery.

Since the aim of Rogerian counselling, and education is individual self-realization and development, along the lines suggested by Maslow (1943), the facilitative role of the teacher lies primarily in exhibiting a non-directive ‘unconditional positive regard’ for his or her students. Soft outcomes such as self-esteem and the therapeutic and developmental role of education become overwhelmingly important. A number of commentators have drawn attention to the dangers of an over-emphasis on this therapeutic model of learning. Furedi has coined the phrase ‘the vulnerable self’ to categorise a deficiency model of human potential which underlies the concepts of self-esteem and self-worth which have become part of the vocabulary of student-centredness (Furedi, 2003). In a recent controversial book called The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes attack the concepts of emotional well-being and emotional literacy as being central to education, claiming that ‘they change the fundamental goals, content and outcomes of education as they had traditionally been conceived’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008). The learner becomes a procrustean bed upon which education is forced to lie, stretched or truncated to fit, as in the UK where school history has even been altered to encourage desirable affective learner responses.

8. Learner engagement and individuation

Allied to concepts of self-esteem and satisfaction as an essential part of any student-centred educational endeavour is the concept of learner engagement. This perceived pre-requisite for learning absorbs much teacher time and resources, particularly in adapting material to the individual learner.

Learner diversity, which underpins many current views of student-centredness, is currently addressed in concepts of multiple intelligences, learning styles, and a wide spectrum of cognitive and affective conditions.

The concept of multiple intelligences developed by Professor Howard Gardner proposes that individuals possess a number of different intelligences, resulting in their demonstrating a ‘jagged intelligence profile’. So some people may possess the traditionally high status intelligences of skills in verbal or numerical reasoning, and others possess may possess kinaesthetic, naturalistic or social intelligence. This theory, with its political resonances, undermines the hierarchical view of intelligence proposed by Sherman (1945). The theory itself has been attacked on the grounds that it changes our understanding of the term. In its use as a pedagogical strategy, it suggests the need to emphasise differentiation in both teaching and learning, at the expense of social or group cohesiveness.

Some years ago, learning styles were a major fashion in pedagogy, and claimed as a vital tool in student-centred learning. Numerous tools and scales have been devised to measure, for example:

- left or right brain dominance (Hermann);
- learner preferences for visual or auditory modalities, (Fleming),
- measures of extraversion or introversion etc.(Myers Briggs).
At one point, the English National Primary curriculum advisers suggested that teachers to change their teaching styles every ten minutes in order to accommodate the different learner styles of their pupils. There is no doubt that a learner’s ability to identify his or her own learning strengths and weaknesses is a useful meta-cognitive strategy, but experience has shown that it can lead to children and younger learners labelling and stereotyping themselves and others as a particular type of learner, thereby avoiding the challenge of adopting other learning styles and modes. As the developmental psychologist Helene Guldberg asks, ‘Do we really want to accentuate difference’? She queries whether a system of education can work unless it is based on general principles that arise from groups and cohorts rather than individuals (Furedi 2009: 15).

Moreover, subject or disciplinary areas require particular and specific skills – is it possible for example, to engage in philosophical or legal debate without acquiring a facility for words and argument? The danger with the generic nature of learning styles or another recent generic manifestation, that of personal transferable skills, is that it ignores the concept of situatedness in learning, and the necessity to adapt personal skills or expertise to the demands of the subject and its epistemology.

9. Student-centred administration

The adaptation of materials to students at the micro-classroom level extends also to the macro-institutional one. Administrative practices in higher education are increasingly focussed on individual student needs. The drivers for this are both philosophical and pragmatic. Philosophically, the centrality of the learner is an article of faith in educational discourse where constructivist educational theories have the learner engaging in an active process of personal meaning-making. Pragmatically, higher education institutions are under pressure to attract and to retain their students. In any marketing exercise ‘the customer is king’ and nowadays learners are seen (and see themselves) as customers who are buying an educational product.

The notion of the student as ‘customer’ is proving stressful to teachers. We know of many who are very wary of giving accurate grading or critical feedback to students for fear of the claim that their self-esteem has been damaged. Professor John Summers in a highly controversial article last year for the Times Higher Educational Supplement entitled ‘All the privileged must have prizes’ states that students in the Social Studies Program at Harvard where he had been a visiting scholar possessed a ‘gross sense of entitlement’ and waged ‘political reprisals against the B-grader’ (THES 2008: July).

Higher education institutions are presently watching carefully a case going through the NY courts where a NY information technology graduate is suing her college on the grounds that it to provide her with adequate career advice and leads to employers (Assoc. Press. 2009).

Furedi claims that student-centred learning is ‘[…] used in a rhetorical sense by some universities to indicate that ‘we are very responsive and student friendly’ and in other places as a managerial strategy to stabilise student retention rates” (Gill, 2008: 32). A major article on student-centred learning which featured in the UK Times Higher Educational Supplement last year showed that even proponents of student-centredness concede that ‘the way that people talk about student-centred learning is one thing, and the way it operates in the classroom is another, and may demotivate some students who do not see the point of it’. (de Napoli in Gill:2008: 32). This view is
endorsed by Furedi who in the same article claims that better students are being ‘short-changed’ because they are not being intellectually stretched with academics failing to take the imitative. (Gill:2008:32).

One of the managerial strategies used is that of modularisation. This is student-centred in the sense that it presents material in separate portions that students can more easily digest. Modules also offer students flexibility in selecting modules of interest. Within certain limits, modularisation even allows students to ‘design’ their own degrees. Modules (in theory) also facilitate individual student mobility and credit transfer nationally and even internationally.

Central to modularisation are learning outcomes: ‘[…] written statement[s] of what the successful student/learner is expected to be able to do at the end of the module/course unit or qualification’ (Adam 2004). A seminal influential article entitled ‘From teaching to learning: a new paradigm for undergraduate education’ (Barr and Tagg, 1995) argues for a move from a traditional teacher-centred paradigm to a student-centred learning paradigm, based on explicit learning outcomes, clearly linked to assessment. Hussey and Smith (2003: 367) even suggest that learners as well as teachers should participate in the development of learning outcomes.

Notice the prominence of the word ‘student’ (emphasis ours) in the following quotation from Baume (2009: 9) who describes a good learning outcome as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active</th>
<th>it describes what students can do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attractive</td>
<td>students want to achieve it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensible</td>
<td>students know what it means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>to the student’s current goals and career plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attainable</td>
<td>most students will mostly meet it, with due effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessable</td>
<td>we can see if it has been achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visible</td>
<td>in the course booklet and in the VLE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since learning outcomes reside in the student and may have been acquired by means other than those envisaged by programme developers, administrative mechanisms are in place in most higher education institutions for obtaining credit on the basis of prior experiential learning.

Although some writers of learning outcomes may attempt to address overarching issues, they face the problem that learning outcomes by their nature are discrete statements. This leads to an epistemology of atomisation and granularity (Carlile 2009). Higher education requires integration and connectedness.

On top of the granularity of learning outcomes is placed the linearity of modular structures. The division of a body of knowledge in a programme into a set of modules involves an implicit assumption that learning is a linear process. The learner engages with the material in a module, achieves the learning outcomes, gains the credits and moves on without a backward glance.
However, Hussey and Smith claim that knowledge development involves an iterative and expanding spiral, rather than a linear process (Hussey and Smith 2003:359).

Learning outcomes and modularisation are student-centred in the way that they break the material of a particular body of knowledge into convenient pieces for digestion by students. They may do this even when it may not suit the nature of the material particularly well. Such student-centredness may both prescribe what is to be learned and proscribe what is not so that learning is focussed in a reductionist and strategic manner on threshold levels and minimum requirements. This can even prevent speculation on future developments in the discipline and on deeper issues of philosophy and values not addressed by outcome statements. This can create what Kathryn Ecclestone calls a ‘[…] subtle form of closure on ideas about what is important in learning’ (Ecclestone, 1999: 29-36).

Students demand speed and convenience but some deep knowledge can only be acquired over a long time with much inconvenient work. In learning, rather than leading to a destination, the journey itself is the destination. In his book Outliers, Malcolm Gladwell cites research from neuro-science indicating that ten thousand hours is required to achieve mastery of a field (Gladwell, 2008)

But it there is a third element in the mix that cannot be ignored – the knowledge that is the medium in the teaching and learning process. A student goes to college to study certain subjects. Such studying means that the student needs to focus on that particular subject. Personal development occurs as a by-product of the learning but it is not the initial point.

10. Disciplinary knowledge

This brings us to the nub of the problem – that a conception of student centredness which prioritises student choice ignores the way that knowledge is constructed within a domain or disciplinary framework, and is transmitted from expert to novice (Lave and Wenger (1991).

The Teaching for Understanding movement (TfU) as developed in Harvard by Howard Gardner and the Project Zero team recognises the importance of disciplinary knowledge. (Wiske, 1998). 'Understanding occurs within a particular discipline and cannot be separated from it.' (Jordan and Carlile 2009)

The dimensions of understanding framework developed in line with TfU, suggests a way of analysing and organising topics in a discipline. According to TfU, within overall understanding are discipline specific dimensions of knowledge, form, methods and purposes (McCarthy, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>What is the material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forms</td>
<td>How is it expressed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>How it is done?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposes</td>
<td>Why it is done?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Particularly discipline specific are what Meyer and Land (2003) refer to as ‘threshold concepts’. These are particular concepts that are often counter-intuitive and difficult to grasp but are important for progress. Once understood, threshold concepts cause an ontological irreversible shift and a transformed way of understanding (Graham and Potter, 2008).

Stevenson and Saunders point out that in medicine, a subject area reliant on traditional methods of learning, that medical students are suspicious of student centred learning methods. (O’Neill and McMahon, 2005). The same could be true of a number of scientific disciplines where procedures, facts or formulae need to be learned, possibly in a prescriptive or repetitive fashion, so that they can be recalled when necessary. The room for manoeuvre and choice in some subject areas may be significantly narrower than in domains such as the humanities or social sciences where learners, especially those with relevant life experiences may choose the topics they wish to study, or the ways they wish to be assessed on their knowledge and skills in such areas.

Learner centredness may implicitly assume that the subject is a malleable object that can be presented to different students in different ways depending on the students’ preferences and learning styles. However this may not always be the case. The effort to suit the student may not suit the subject. The pedagogy may be pulled in two different directions – one that suits the student; another that suits the subject. The teacher, possessing a combination of disciplinary expertise and teaching expertise, is in a position to analyse topics and present them in a manner that meets the requirements of students. If that is not possible, the teacher may help the student to develop knowledge and skills necessary to master the discipline. The teacher is not just a ‘facilitator of learning’, she is more like an orchestral conductor who knows both the nature of the music and the styles and abilities of the performers.

![Figure 1: The teacher matches pedagogy to meet the needs of both discipline and the learner](image-url)
11. Recommendation for a way forward

The enthusiasm for student centredness must not lead to extremes where the needs of the individual student overrule the needs of the discipline. The learning process, transferable skills, learning to learn, critical thinking, creativity and so on all arise in the context of particular disciplinary knowledge and expertise which the teacher possesses and the students, initially, do not. According to the research of Baxter Magolda (1992) students progress through stages of epistemological development, from a belief in absolute facts and authority to the formation of their own views and opinions (the relativistic stage) and in fewer cases, to the most advanced stage which is the evaluation of knowledge claims in context. That context is the particular discipline and the aim of good student-centred teaching should be the attainment of that stage.

It is important to signal a return to a greater sociological emphasis in education, stressing the needs of society rather than simply individual self-fulfilment. We need to move away from paradigms drawn from humanistic psychology and return to a more complex disciplinary focus. Rather than prioritising personal development, engagement and self-esteem, educators should help students navigate disciplinary discourses through immersion, experience and engagement in communities of practice. Individual engagement and enhanced self-esteem are a consequence of the mastery displayed in performance.

Student centredness must not blur the difference between disciplines. If students cannot recognise the boundaries between the different types of knowledge then they are trapped within their own experiences (Whelehan) and unless they are exposed to knowledge they do not encounter in their everyday lives they will never be able to develop the higher cognitive thinking with which to interrogate and validate experience and authority (Simon) – (Furedi, 2009 :20)

Student centred must not mean that the discipline is peripheral. Of course teachers are aware of the importance of their discipline but if it remains an unarticulated assumption then it is in danger of being diminished. In this paper we hope at least to have made the issues explicit and ask people to consider their own assumptions and discuss them – whether for or against student-centred learning or to take a more nuanced view, and so to see where the value of student-centredness really lies.
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