

# STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING – THE NEED FOR VALUE INJECTION

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## ABSTRACT

Student-centred learning (SCL) refers to an educational environment where students are actively involved in what they are studying with teachers as facilitators. Based on the observations of the author on diploma students, she found there was a gap between the seven tenets of SCL found in literatures and what the students were expected and capable of. The inability of students to read and write effectively in English and poor time management were two common problems encountered. The current generation grew up in an era of the Internet and smartphones and they are used to short messages and are overloaded with information. This is also the era when college education is commonly available. As such, in pursuance of SCL, teachers may mistakenly tailor teaching according to the characteristics of the students hence further impair their inability to study effectively. To be truly student-centred, educators need to prepare them for society's on-going needs and demands. There is a need to inject values that will help the students to achieve their goals in college and their working life. The three main aspects would be to embrace the idea of being hard-working, to persevere in improving the command of English language and to have good time-management which involves discipline. This is consistent with the idea of the Beliefs-Values-Rules (BVR) belief system.

**Keywords:** *student-centred learning, value injection, time-management, perseverance, BVR belief system*

## INTRODUCTION

When teachers teach and students take notes, it is perceived that knowledge is being transmitted from the teachers to the students. However, this is only a transmission of information and it may not immediately become the knowledge of the students. Knowledge is a state of understanding; it must be constructed or reconstructed by each individual through the process of trying to make sense of the information. This process is done by connecting the new information to what that person already knows (King 1993). Since students need to process the information they receive, they are actively participating in thinking and discussing ideas while making meaning for themselves. This idea of active learning was put forward as early as the 1900s (O'Neill & McMahon 2005, King 1993).

Dr. Carl Rogers, the creator of client-centered counselling, expanded his approach in psychology into a general theory of education (Britannica 2005, O'Neill & McMahon 2005). Over the years, many teachers have experimented with different approaches and activities based on Dr. Rogers' approach that involved the students in the process of learning and these are termed as student-centered learning. (King 1993, Wilhelm 1997, Meece 2003)

One key concept in the student-centered learning approach is that students take responsibility and accountability of their own learning process with the teachers as facilitators. Based on the observation of the author and her colleagues on their students, there is a mismatch between this concept and the attitude of learning among the students. In order to use student-centered learning effectively, there is a need for students to demonstrate certain attitudes and thus value injection in the process of teaching is needed.

This paper will look at the assumptions and practice of student-centered learning, the idea of the Beliefs-Values-Rules (BVR) system as the basis for attitude change and the need for value injection.

## **STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING (SCL)**

According to Rogers' hypothesis, "A person cannot teach another person directly; a person can only facilitate another's learning." According to him, a person learns significantly only those things that are important to the self of the learner and that this person will become more rigid under threats but more relax when completely free from threat. As such, to promote significant learning in a most effective way, the educational situation must be one in which threat to the self of the learner is minimal and differentiated perception of the field is facilitated (Rogers 2003).

Since the introduction of Rogers' hypothesis, many educators have expounded on this idea and many literatures were published, amongst them were McCombs and Whisler (1997) who developed the SCL model based on five assumptions. The first assumption is that learners are distinct and unique. For learners to take responsibility of their learning, teachers must take account of their uniqueness. The uniqueness of learners includes their different emotional states of mind, learning rates, learning styles, learning ability etc. The second assumption states that all these academic and non-academic attributes must be taken into account in order for teachers to provide the learners with the challenges and opportunities for learning and self-development. The third assumption is that learning is a constructive process. This process occurs best when what is being learned is relevant and meaningful to the learner. The fourth assumption states that learning occurs best in a positive environment where there are positive interpersonal relationships and interactions such that the learner feels appreciated, respected and validated. Lastly, learners are naturally curious and basically interested in learning about and mastering their world.

Lea et al. (2003) summarises some of the literature on SCL to include the following tenets:

1. The reliance on active rather than passive learning;
2. An 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. Mutual respect within the learner teacher relationship; and
7. A reflexive approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both teacher and learner.

Nanney (2004) pointed out that SCL is a broad teaching approach which encompasses replacing lectures with active learning, integrating self-paced learning programs that ultimately hold the student responsible for his own advances in education. When used properly, SCL can change college education into a life-long learning process that enables the student to seek solutions to problems without having to depend upon a teacher. In SCL, the teacher facilitates the learner individually or in groups by posing problems, setting time limits, providing varying amounts of guidance, asking leading questions, choosing students to respond, or giving positive responses. The teacher also decides when the focus of discussion needs to be changed or the discussion to be ended.

Summing the above, SCL is thus about helping students to discover their own learning styles and to acquire effective study skills that will be valuable throughout their lives. As teachers change their role from 'the sage on the stage' to 'the guide by the side', students are responsible for their own learning.

## **STUDENTS' LEARNING BEHAVIOUR**

In the six years of teaching diploma students at Sunway College Johor Bahru, the author observed that majority of the diploma students did not have the required attitude as described in the seven tenets of SCL stated above. Students also did not express the curiosity and interest in learning as stated in the last assumption of the SCL model.

To briefly describe her observation in general, students were very passive in learning in that they waited for the teacher to prompt them in their learning. They did not try to receive the information transmitted and turn it into their knowledge. Many of them did last minute memorisation before sitting for the final examination and they regurgitated whatever that was memorised and therefore answers written expressing the students' own opinion were hardly seen.

Students were not punctual in attending class or did not return to class immediately after the break time was over. One of the reasons students came late to class was oversleeping. They could be late even for afternoon class because they had overslept. Most of the time, they were paying attention to their mobile phones or smart phones during class hour. They would be talking loudly among themselves while the teachers were teaching, or they would have actions that were distracting to the teachers. In other words, students did not show any sign of respect for teachers and others in the classroom (Poh 2010) unlike what is stated in the 6th tenet above.

Many students did not have a good level of proficiency in the English language. They were unable to comprehend fully what was transmitted from the teachers or from what they read in the guide books. Due to poor command of English, many could not speak or write in English with correct grammar or sentence structure. Some concepts were wrongly understood. Some even appeared to be rude when asking a question or giving an answer while responding to the teachers. The low level of English proficiency could be the reason for lack of enthusiasm expressed via the learning behaviour in class.

Other than the language problem, students were unable to manage time well to complete their tasks in time. If there was a two-hour break in between classes, they would rather travel a distance for lunch than to stay in the library for revision or further studies. Many assignments were submitted at the last minute of the due date which was clearly a rushed piece of work with quality below par.

Some students studied for examination just one or two days before the examination and they studied throughout the night forgoing their sleep. A handful of students even resorted to cheating during examination time. These were students who could not balance their time for studies between the coursework and the examination components. There is also a correlation between the command of language and time management. When a student does not have proficiency in English, he will need more time to understand articles or information given in English thus rendering him ineffective in time management.

If students do not have a good command of the English language and time management, they will not be able to learn with deep understanding or to have a sense of autonomy in their learning as stated in the seven tenets of SCL. Many students come from families and schools which are not English speaking. To have a good command of the English language, students need to realise they need to put in extra effort in learning this language every day. In other words, they need to work hard and need to persevere in the

process of learning English language. Self-discipline in knowing that time is a scarce resource and therefore each should prioritise one's activities and trade-off of some activities are inevitable.

## **THE NEED FOR VALUE INJECTION**

The current generation, termed the Y-generation, grew up in an era of the Internet and smartphone. They receive information every second and most of the time are overloaded with information. They may be very well informed but they may not be knowledgeable. Most of the time they may be receiving information that are so trivial and do not build up their knowledge or personality. A common example would be someone who took pictures of the food and drink he had ordered in a restaurant and posted them on the Facebook. Immediately push messages of smart phones would be prompting his friends' for attention.

This group of students are also living in an era where college education is privatised and abundantly available. As such, to be competitive, colleges may tailor their programs to suit the characteristics of this group of students and call it student-centered learning. In the context that students are brought up to read only short messages, colleges may make notes that are short, conduct classes in short duration for instance, of less than one hour, show slides with very few words and allow the use of smartphone to take notes. This approach may actually further impair the ability of students to read long passages, to make their own notes and to have deep learning and understanding. This also may account for the handwriting of some students to be illegible. No wonder some literatures pointed out that many educators claim to be putting SCL into practice, but in reality they are not (Lea et al 2003).

Quoting from Dr. Wade Carpenter, 'Student-centeredness can be awfully unimaginative, if we are so interested in letting the kid "be what he or she is" that we don't aim for what the kid could be or should be.' (Carpenter 2000). In order to practice SCL effectively, the students need to have the necessary attitude and in order to have the required attitude, some values need to be injected or enhanced during the course of the lesson.

## **Beliefs, Values and Rules (BVR)**

It is common to see that people rationally know or believe that they need to take an action or do something but they are not doing it due to some emotions that deter them from taking the action such as the feeling of reluctance. This can be explained from the belief system of BVR.

BVR stands for Beliefs-Values-Rules. It is a belief system put forward by a famous Chinese neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) teacher Mr. Li Zhong Ying (Su 2013, Li nd). According to him, the attitude of a person is derived from the belief system of that person. In order to change the attitude of a person, one must first change the belief system.

Beliefs refer to what a person thinks as truth. Values refer to why a person is pursuing what he wants. For example: Mr. A believes that being successful means to achieve one's goal in life and he wants to become a lawyer. Mr. B believes that being successful means he must become a millionaire. For Mr. A, the value of being a lawyer means he could then lead a happy life according to his heart's desire. The value of being a millionaire to Mr. B is that he could then live luxuriously and be respected by people. Rules refer to how a person is able to achieve his goal. Referring to the example of Mr. A, he would therefore study hard to obtain his licence while Mr. B would accumulate wealth by all means.

The belief system is the basis of our thoughts and actions. As people have different belief systems, people will have different definition of success and thus different course of actions. In the above example, when Mr. A is dealing with people, he may be easy going whereas Mr. B may choose to befriend only the rich and the famous. The expression of attitude towards others is the expression of the BVR a person holds on to. So to change the attitude of a person, one needs to first change the belief system (Su 2013). This is also supported by Dr Marshall who wrote: “The beliefs and theories we hold direct our thoughts. Our thoughts mould our perceptions and direct our actions.” (Marshall 2012).

For students to benefit from SCL, the attitude of learning must be in tune with the seven tenets mentioned above. This required attitude stems from the value they need to hold on to and the author believes that being hardworking is one such value. Being hardworking means to do something related to one’s life consistently and diligently. If one believes in the value of hard-work, one would put in effort consistently and even persevere through hard time with the spirit of Nike – ‘Just do it!’

The 21st century is a globalised world. English is the main language used in interaction with other countries especially in the business world. Many students who do not have a good command of English realise the need and the importance to improve on their language proficiency. However they lack the determination to learn on a daily basis. They need to be aware that there is no short cut and success will not come without consistent practice and perseverance in learning the English language. The secret to success is no secret. The key to success is to consistently practise what we believe in (Poh 2010).

In order to manage time well, hard work is also needed in their studies and therefore students should realise the need for them to allocate time for reading, research, practising exercises etc., in preparation for assignments and final examinations. As such, they may have to give up their time on idle chatting, long lunch break, Facebook time, online game, etc. and all these require self-discipline. Embracing the value of being hard-working will also translate into the attitude of getting up early enough for class because ‘mindsets drive our behaviors’ (Marshall 2012).

The value of being hard-working will not only help the students to achieve their goal in college, it would help them later in their working life. In a recent interview by Sin Chew Daily, Tan Seri Dr. Jeffrey Cheah commented that young people of the Y-generation are not as hard-working as the older generation and he perceived that (not being hard-working) may be a social problem. He said success does not come easy; to persevere and to work hard is a crucial key for competitiveness (Liu 2013).

As a young child who does not know the value of safety, he may refuse to put on the safety belt while being driven in a car. A father who truly loves the child would need to inject such value to his belief system and keep on reminding the child to put on his safety belt. In a similar tone, to help students learn effectively, teachers could inject values during the contact hours with the students. Whether as a sage or a guide, the teachers’ conscious effort in injecting or enhancing values in students will help them in pursuing their goals. Quoting from Dr. Marshall again, “Motivation is the art of getting people to do what you want them to do because they want to do it.”

## **CONCLUSION**

For student-centered learning to be effective, students need to have the right attitude towards learning. There is a need to consciously and continuously inject values that will help the students believe in values that will translate into the necessary attitude for learning. To be truly student-centered, educators need to prepare them for society’s on-going needs and demands. With the values underlie the attitude in learning they will be better facing their working life. The three main aspects of values would be to be hard working, to persevere in improving the command of languages and to have good time-management which involves discipline.

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