It's in the Syllabus! An Innovative Approach to Student Engagement through Collaborative Syllabus Development

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Introduction and Need for LCT Strategy

Student-centered learning (SCL) has been defined as an approach to learning that "shifts the focus of instruction from the professor's needs to the students' [needs] (Richmond, et al., 2016). Built with its foundations in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Thomas & Veldhouse, 1990) and Empowerment Theory (ET) (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), SCL implementation has been shown to make students feel more competent in their learning activities, find these activities more meaningful, and feel they have personal influence on the learning process and their own learning (Houser & Frymier, 2009). Michaelson and Black (1994) opined that SCL strategies allow students to take control of content, course learning activities, and the pace of learning in a course. O'Neill, et al's., (2005) comprehensive definition of SCL includes the components of active learning, learner choice, and a shift of power in the teacher-student relationship.

One innovative way students can be empowered through a learner-centered approach to learning is through the collaborative development of a course syllabus. The purpose of this Learner-Centered Teaching presentation is to share how I used collaborative student syllabus development in a Teaching Agricultural Mechanics Methods course to empower upper level preservice teacher education students and provide "high-level cognitive activities and a more personal instructional design" (Edgar, Retallick, & Jones, 2016, p. 38).

Connection to Literature

Typically, the course syllabus is a student's first contact with a faculty member (Richmond, et al., 2016) and functions as a primary communication document that provides learning assessment details as well as the roles of both student and instructors in the learning process (Habanek, 2006). Higher education faculty can develop a more learner-centered approach through the development of a learner-centered syllabus (Richmond, et al., 2016). Hudd (2003) suggested that students who experienced a collaborative syllabus development activity in an Introductory Sociology course experienced increased participation in the course, partly due to what they perceived as a level of increased control. Further, Richmond, et al., (2016) suggested "investigating the impact of generating a learner-focused syllabus may prove to be valuable in improving the perceptions students have of faculty teaching" (p.161).

How it Works/Implementation of LCT Strategy

I used the collaborative syllabus development process as the opening day activity in my *Teaching with Agricultural Laboratories* course. The course consisted of four upper-level preservice teacher education students. Since the students already knew each other and me quite well, team-building and other icebreaker activities were not implemented. Students actively engaged in collaboratively developing the content, activities, and assessments for the course through an extended KWL activity (what students **K**now, **W**ant to know, and what they **L**earned). Before the first class session, I developed a modified version of the KWL built from Experiential Leaning Theory (Kolb, 1984) to include previous experiences with laboratories as well as SCL strategies to support autonomous learning. Students were first asked to identify

previous **E**xperiences with agricultural labs, what they **K**new or thought they knew about how these laboratory classes functioned, **W**hy what they knew was important, what they **W**anted to learn, **W**here they could learn it, and finally how we could **A**ssess their **L**earning to complete the EKWWAL process. Figure 1 below shows the EKWWAL process as captured on the class' white board at the end of the first day of class.

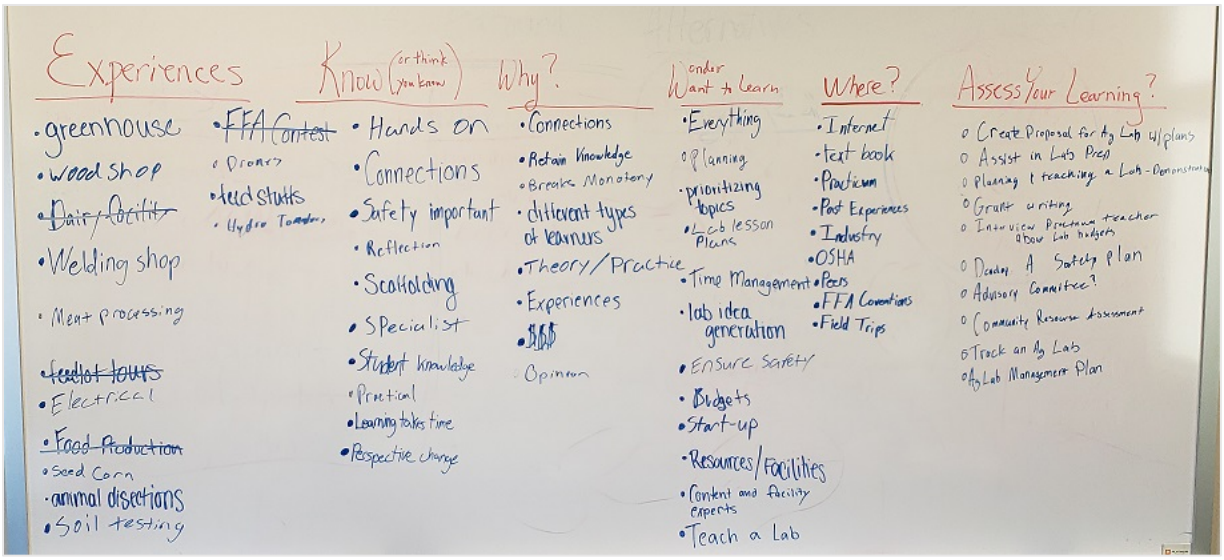

Figure 1. EKWWAL – Experiences, Knowledge (Know and Want to Know), Why it is important, Where to find information, How to assess learning.

Not surprisingly, the content, importance, and assessment ideas collaboratively developed by the students with my facilitation aligned quite nicely with my initial course plans and the required Teacher Educations Standards previously identified for the course. Final course reflections supported enhanced student engagement due to students' perceived empowerment in the development of the course. Specifically, students reflected upon new agricultural laboratory experiences provided through the course and 10-hour practicum experience, felt the assessment activities they completed were relevant, and demonstrated attainment of knowledge and skills needed to utilize laboratories successfully in agricultural education programs.

Future Plans

Empowering preservice teacher education students through the use of learner-centered teaching strategies will provide them with positive experiences that increase engagement due to a perceived feeling of control in their learning process. This experience should help students to feel confidence in developing learner-centered strategies for their future School-Based Agricultural Education programs. As this cohort of students moves through Morningside College's Teacher Education program of study, the continuation of student choice in course syllabus development, as well as other areas, will be critical. Richmond, et al.'s (2016) recommendation to investigate the impact of generating a learner-focused syllabus could provide an additional line of future research beneficial to the scholarship of learner-centered teaching.

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