

**Learner-Centered Engagement Approaches to Teaching and Learning:
Reflections from Three Courses**

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Introduction, Need and Connection to Literature: In recent years, especially with COVID-19 challenging the education mission of colleges and universities, the concept of learner centered teaching (LCT) has taken a new meaning and offered opportunities for instructors to redesign their approaches to teaching and learning. According to Weimer (2012), LCT embodies five characteristics: 1) total engagement of students in the learning process, 2) acquisition of skill instruction that help students to think, solve problems, analyze arguments, debate, 3) encouragement of students to reflect on their learning, specifically telling what they are learning and how they are learning the concept, 4) give control of the learning processes to students thereby increasing motivation to learn, and 5) encourages collaboration, that is, students learn from each other. In the last decade or so, several scholars have documented the importance and effectiveness of the LCT. Consensus from these studies suggest that: 1) active learning strategies such as LCT engages students in the learning process which helps in knowledge retention (Handelsman, et al, 2004, 2) greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught (Collins & O'Brien, 2003), and 3) more advantageous outcomes compared to traditional teaching method (Weimer, 2012). McCombs and Whistler (1997) state that in an LCT environment, learners are treated as co-creators in the learning process, as individuals with ideas and issues that deserve attention and consideration. We used Weimer's (2012) characteristics of LCT as a framework for this abstract and presentation.

Purpose and Objectives: The purpose of this LCT presentation is to showcase the use of LCT in undergraduate and graduate level courses at three different universities. First, we share background information on the courses and the use of LCT. Second, we describe how the students were engaged in each of the three courses where they eventually became co-creators in the learning process, and third, we share the feedback from students who took these courses.

Implementation Strategy and Results: Description of Courses: Course 1: Morningside University is a small, residential, private university with a growing major agricultural department. In 2020, a new Agriculture Center on campus with outdoor classroom and a 130' by 30' greenhouse was funded. The spring 2021 AAFS Capstone course was comprised of nine graduating seniors and focused upon the development of enterprise plans for the new Ag Center through a Team-Based Learning approach (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2004). Students were given specifications related to the physical layout of the Ag Center and greenhouse and divided into committees and teams (McCubbins, Paulsen, & Anderson, 2016) to research and make business planning decisions related to their implementation in the ensuing academic year. Three team business plans were developed which each included a minimum of three enterprises. Individually, students completed and presented a peer-reviewed, strategic issue analysis (Paulsen, 2009) of nine exclusive enterprises. Anecdotally, students shared that they enjoyed the opportunity to work in committees to research their plans, they learned a lot about the importance of teamwork through the coursework and team development of their business plans, and they felt pride in leaving a legacy for future students in the program. They greatly appreciated the opportunity for the learner-centered engagement approach brought to the capstone course.

Course 2: In a LCT Reading Course (fall 2020) at Langston University, students participated in a virtual service- learning Readers Theater. The purpose of Readers Theater is not to increase students' reading speed, but rather to use repeated readings as a way for students to find deeper meaning of text while making significant gains in expressive reading (Rasinski, 2012). This type of repeated reading, "provides students with diverse learning needs an opportunity for authentic participation in rereading texts- in contrast to the traditional skill and drill approach of rereading text by teacher direction" (Garrett & Connor, 2010, p. 7). Today, and historically, stories remain an engaging way to learn important moral lessons. According to 2019 Teach Hub.com (Teaching Strategies: about Reader's Theater), Reader's Theatres have built-in instructional strategies to improve teaching and learning (to improve reading skills) for young readers. The dramatic interaction and engagement cause readers to look more closely to the book text to visually interpret meaning into the reading experience. Through the Reader's Theatre, students can improve fluency, vocabulary, and *comprehension skills*.

Course 3: This was a graduate level, one-credit course at Penn State designed as get familiar with and understand how agricultural extension is organized around the world. Students selected a country of their choice and adhered to the course requirements in preparing the final paper and presentation which included: 1) describe the social, economic, and political factors, 2) identify the chosen country's Extension system, describe its history; discuss how Extension programs are designed, delivered and evaluated; 3) identify strengths and weaknesses and suggest opportunities to improve them, and finally, 4) compare and contrast the U.S. Extension system with the chosen country. Students were engaged from the start till the completion of the 16-week semester. A set of eight initial questions were provided by the instructor to guide the final paper and presentations. Students modified these questions to meet their individual needs. Once the country was selected, students collected data through literature search, interviews with students from the countries selected, discussion with peers and the instructor. This experience was truly a learner-centered from the beginning to the end culminating in a paper/abstract worthy of presentation at research conferences. One student noted, "*the student-lead approach motivated my self-learning about the topics presented. through this course, I raised my knowledge about the Ag. Extension internationally and get a broad perspective of how the extension works around the world, the common aspects and challenges.*"

Implications and Advice to Others: Collectively, these three courses have shown how learner-centered approaches can be used in the teaching-learning process. The concept of engagement, collaboration, teamwork, self-reflection, and learning is evident. Students indicated that with some guidance they can not only be learners but also co-creators of the teaching and learning process. Instructors thinking of using learner-centered approach will immensely benefit from the experiences achieved in these courses. Furthermore, for the three instructors, these experiences have expanded their repertoire of their teaching.

We will engage participants by using Kahoot, Role playing, and small group-discussions in this interactive presentation. Participants will have an opportunity to 1) participate in discussions and in a mock reader's theater experience, 2) learn from shared experiences of presenters, and 3) engage in innovative ways to create online tools to support their LCT instructional activities.

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