Finding Your Place in a Student-Centered Classroom as a Teacher-Facilitator

By Michael M. Grant

Implementing student-centered learning takes work. It's always easier and less time consuming for teachers to lecture. But, in doing so, we are shortchanging our students. We're denying them the opportunity to take charge of their learning and the freedom to direct their own learning. But teachers, who are comfortable in teacher-centered classrooms, often feel out of place in a student-centered classroom.

These teachers either discard the notion of facilitating student learning, reverting back to didactic teaching, or recede into the instructional background, implementing a student-centered, unfacilitated classroom (Bickford, Tharp, McFarling, & Beglau, 2002). But again, students are coming up educationally short with no guidance at all.

So, how do teachers become more comfortable and confident in student-centered classrooms, using pedagogies like project-based and problem-based learning? Five factors influence the transition from teacher-centered to student-centered, teacher-facilitated instruction. While these factors may seem discreet, there is constant interaction among them within a classroom and in the larger school context.

Influencing the transition to facilitator

First, as teachers transition to student-centered instructional strategies, they have to *recognize and accept their new roles and responsibilities* as a facilitator. A teacher's dominant responsibility for and control of learning is reduced in a student-centered classroom. What the teacher teaches also shifts. A teacher may teach more "soft skills," such as time management and group negotiations. In addition, the pressure for a teacher to be the sole source of content is relieved. As students direct their own projects, the teacher assists in decisions about learning, such as prerequisite knowledge and skills, potential resources, scope, depth and critical thinking.

A teacher also has to *achieve comfort* in his new student-centered learning environment. The activity, noise and physical dislocation can be unsettling and chaotic to a didactic teacher. As students collaborate and share resources, moving in and out of peer groups, the classroom can easily become a messy place when desks and benches are pushed together. Classrooms and laboratories may even be insufficient to support student investigations. In some instances, students may need to meet in computer labs, the media center or an outdoor laboratory.

Teacher-facilitators must also *tolerate the ambiguity and flexibility* inherent to student-centered learning. In directed classrooms, learning management is controlled by the teacher. Student-centered learning has students exploring areas that may be unfamiliar to the teacher; the range of questions about content and relevancy can be quite broad. The teacher has to reconcile with himself the management of this dynamic environment. The need for scaffolding, modeling and guidance by the teacher is heightened.

Many student-centered pedagogies include technology as an integral element in the learning process. Teachers must be *confident integrating technology* into their classrooms. Teachers have the opportunity to increase the authenticity of content and tasks by reflecting the actual work of professionals in the field. Technologies, such as scientific processes, computer technologies and electronic resources, lend credence to these assignments by demonstrating appropriate and purposeful uses. When integrating technology, teachers may need to become a teacher of technology, as well, expanding the content area. Introducing students to Internet resources, science probes and spreadsheets can become part of a teacher's curriculum.

Finally, a teacher has to incorporate student-centered learning within the *realities of the larger school culture*. As teachers, we want our students to succeed. However, some students may struggle with the added

As teachers, we want our students to succeed. However, some students may struggle with the added responsibilities and changes in their roles.

responsibilities and changes in their roles. We have to be prepared to support these students. A hallmark of student-centered learning is allowing for in-depth study. However, standardized tests and district curricula can demand a broader scope with less depth. So, incorporating student-centered learning into an existing teacher-centered school culture can be frustrating.

Striking a balance

With these factors in play, how does a teacher balance student-centered learning into everyday instruction? First, since students' roles and responsibilities are shifting along with the teacher, begin slowly. One teacher suggests beginning with two projects a year, instead of a continuous stream of projects (Scott, 1994). This way, the in-depth investigations, can be tempered with other content dictated by district and state standards.

Second, almost all student-centered learning strategies attempt to capitalize on cooperative and collaborative learning. Teachers will need to aid inexperienced students as they manage conflict within groups and within the stages of group formation—forming, storming, norming and performing (Tuckman, 1965).

Sometimes groups or teams are used in classrooms for more practical reasons, such as insufficient copies of textbooks, equipment and supplies. Making sure all students have the opportunity to interact with resources may be necessary. However, if access to resources is not an issue, then teachers should be more creative with the incorporation of cooperative and collaborative learning, such as peer reviews and client role-playing relationships.

Time management within student-centered learning is also vital. Because of the open-ended nature of projects, it can be difficult to delineate parameters for how much time should be allocated to each segment of the project.

Planning ahead with assignment sheets, resources, scaffolds and rubrics can help facilitate the management within a student-centered classroom, so the teacher is freed from directing next steps. Job-aids, such as checklists and step-by-step instructions, as well as progress charts, can help students to negotiate through a project, while setting deadlines throughout the project also gives students benchmarks for progress.

The notion of "technology as content" is another issue that must be reconciled within a student-centered classroom. While many projects use technology components, such as word processors, electronic spreadsheets and electronic presentations, to collect, analyze and present data, technology cannot be an end unto itself. The technology must be a means to interpret the content, not as content itself. In addition, teachers must not be apprehensive about using technology within their classrooms. Leveraging students' knowledge and skills allows them to become experts in the classroom, as well (Bryan, 2000).

Finally, as described earlier, student-centered learning takes more time than didactic teaching. Having students complete two or three extended projects within an academic year will give them the experience of working in a more open-ended, student-driven classroom without the need to sacrifice curricular content.

While the scope of this article limits fully exploring each of these factors, teacher-facilitators should take the risks to implement student-centered strategies. The rewards for students are immense. As a content expert, model, coach and scaffold, teachers are preparing students to recognize when to employ different cognitive, psychomotor and affective skills, in order to perform in ill-structured learning environments now and in the future.

References

Bickford, A., Tharp, S., McFarling, P., & Beglau, M. (2002). Finding the right fuel for new engines of learning. *Multimedia Schools, 9*(5), 18-26.

Bryan, S. (2000, May 1). *SWAT savvy: A model for effect classroom technology using student experts*. Retrieved June 26, 2003, from http://www.techlearning.com/db_area/archives/WCE/archives/bryan.htm

Lundeberg, M. A., Coballes-Vega, C., Standiford, S. N., Langer, L., & Dibble, K. (1997). We think they're learning: Beliefs, practices, and reflections of two teachers using project-based learning. *Journal of Computing in Childhood Education, 8*(1), 59-81.

Scott, C. (1994). Project-based science: Reflections of a middle school teacher. *Elementary School Journal, 57*(1), 1-22.

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin, 63*, 384-399.

Michael M. Grant is an assistant professor of instructional design and technology in the Department of Instruction and Curriculum Leadership at the University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.