

Teacher-Directed vs. Learner-Centered Designs

For over two decades, educators have been advocating student-centered approaches to teaching and learning (e.g., APA, 1993; CTGV, 1992; Holmes Group; 1990; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Instruction, they say, should meet the needs of individual students, promote active participation, stimulate higher-order thinking and encourage life-long learning. The challenge is trying operationalize these concepts in either a “traditional” classroom environment or in a distance education course with a class of 20 plus students within a system that is more inclined to resist change than embrace it.

Discussions with both public school and university educators suggest a number of reasons for why classroom instruction remains predominately teacher-directed. When asked about their educational philosophy or practice, educators often indicate that they are now “student-centered.” Indeed, it appears that being “student-centered” is important for most educators in the 1990’s. However, when further asked, “what do you do differently now that you are student-centered compared to when you were teacher-centered?” the majority hesitate, some of no reply and others indicate that they are now more sensitive to individual student needs and/or have students work on collaborative or cooperative group projects. While “sensitivity” and group projects may play an integral role, they do not capture the true essence of student-centered learning.

The purpose of this brief paper is to clarify and compare the differences between student-centered and teacher-directed learning. Figure 1 illustrates of the differences in terms of information flow and access among key stakeholders. Table 2 further delineates the differences between student-centered and teacher-directed learning by comparing key instructional variables. Please note: In most practical applications, no one class is either totally teacher-directed or student-centered. In actuality, learning environments typically lie somewhere in between the two extremes and at times flow from one side to the other within a course. Extremes are presented here for illustrative purposes only.

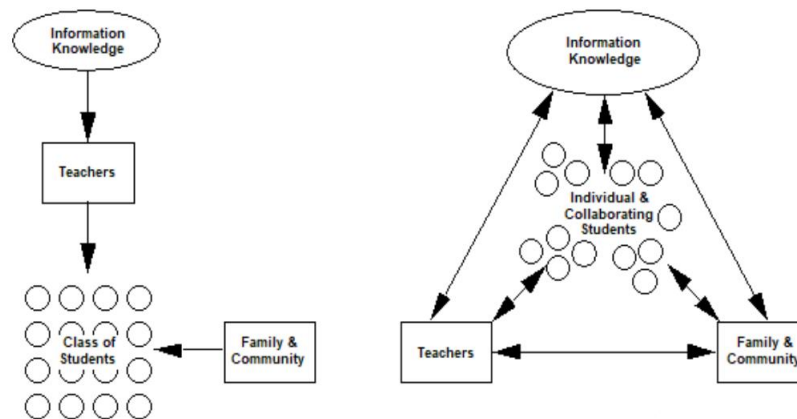


Figure 1. A comparison of teacher-centered and student-centered learning environments

Table 1. A comparison of instructional variables associated with student-centered and teacher-directed approaches to teaching and learning

Instructional Variables	Instructional Approach	
	Teacher-Directed	Student-Centered
Learning Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discipline-specific verbal information, concepts and principles. • Lower order thinking skills (e.g., recall, identify, define). • Memorization of abstract and isolated facts, figures and formulas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdisciplinary knowledge • Higher order thinking skills (e.g., problem solving) • Information processing skills (e.g., search for, access, organize, interpret, communicate information)
Goals & Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher prescribes learning goals and objectives based on prior experiences, past practices, and state and/or locally mandated standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students work with teachers to select learning goals and objectives based on authentic problems and students' prior knowledge, interests and experience
Instructional Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional strategy prescribed by teacher; • Group-paced, designed for "average" student • Information organized and presented primarily by teacher (e.g., lectures) with some supplemental reading assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher works with students to determine learning strategy • Self-paced, designed to meet needs of individual student • Student given direct access to multiple sources of information (e.g., books, on-line databases, community members)
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments used to sort students • Paper & pencil exams used to assess students acquisition of information • Teacher sets performance criteria for students • Students left to find out what teacher wants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment integral part of learning • Performance based, used to assess students ability to apply knowledge • Students work with teachers to define performance criteria • Student develop self-assessment and peer assessment skills
Teachers' Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher organizes and presents information to group of students • Teacher acts as gatekeeper of knowledge, controlling students access to information • Teacher directs learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher provide multiple means for accessing information • Teacher acts as facilitator, helps students access and process information • Teacher facilitates learning
Students' Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students expect teachers to teach them what's required to pass the test • Passive recipients of information • Reconstructs information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students take responsibility for learning • Active knowledge seekers • Constructs knowledge and meaning
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students sit individually in rows, information presented primarily via lectures and reading assignments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students work at stations, individually and in small groups, with access to electronic resources.