Learner-Centered or Teacher-Centered? Medical Teachers' Preferences: a Pilot Study

Karimkhanlouei G, MSc[1]; Mazloomzade S, PhD[1]

[1] Zanjan University of Medical Sciences, Zanjan, Iran

Abstract

Background and purpose: *While learner-centered language teaching has been advocated in higher education in the recent years, teacher-centered pedagogical styles seem to be predominant in several instructional settings. The bottom line is that all teachers must be equipped with a deep knowledge of pedagogical improvements and use them as instructional innovations for the betterment of their pedagogies.*

Methods: *The present study investigates the preference of the instructors for teaching in traditional vs. learner-centered styles of teaching at the Zanjan Medical University. Method: A questionnaire was used to investigate the teachers' preferences for either of these styles. A total of 30 faculty members of the Zanjan Medical University from different fields of study were included as subjects in this study.*

Results: *Results indicated that most instructors (90%) still use traditional/teacher-centered approaches in the University, despite the call for a shift to learner-centered approaches.*

Conclusions: *This study indicated that the instructors needed more facilities and enhanced fundamental knowledge of learner-centered approaches in order to apply this mode of instruction in their teaching process.*

Keywords: *LEARNER-CENTERED, TEACHER-CENTERED, CONSTRUCTIVISM*

Journal of Medical Education Winter 2015; 14(1):39-44

Introduction

It is a widespread belief that the learner-centered approach is a means to meet the diverse needs of a growing population of the learners. It is assumed that learner-centered instruction accounts for and respects the learning needs of the learners, their style of learning, and their strategies. This approach provides the learners with an autonomy by which they can manage their own lifelong learning in accordance with their preferences. Learner-centered approach has fundamentally driven a constructivist view to a learning view. This approach has been advocated by a several researchers such as Zophy et al. (1).

In contrast to the teacher-centered approach that has an inactive role for the learners, places the entire burden on the teachers, and is based on the behaviorist tradition, whereas, in learner-centered approach, the learner is the focus of instruction.

Learner-centered approach has an amalgam of definitions, because of which, the concept of learner-centered education has been smoggy, mainly as it is susceptible to a variety of definitions (2).

On introduction of this approach, some teachers felt challenged with the necessity of tackling classroom management and were not inclined toward it in their instructional environment, mainly because they speculated that, by using it, they will lose their own values as teachers and their professional role will be devalued.

∗**Corresponding author:** Giti Karimkhanlouei, PhD student; TEFL. Zanjan University of Medical Sciences, Zanjan, Iran. Mahdavi St. Shahrak-e Karmandan, Faculty of Medicine. Tel: (+98) 241 4240301-3 (231).
Email: ghiti@zums.ac.ir

Some researchers believe that this approach devalues the teachers by handing teachers' duties over the students, who are obviously inexperienced. Such reflections are often critical points in taking this approach, because teachers have to, in meticulous terminology, change their teaching frameworks.

In fact, an outstanding and salient feature that differentiates between the two approaches is that, in a learner-centered classroom, key decisions about the what, how, and when a material will be taught is mainly determined by the learners.

In contrast, in a teacher- centered approach, it is believed that learners usually do not have the primary knowledge of what to learn and how to learn, and it is the task of the teachers to direct them on the right paths. Consequently, majority of the burden falls on the teachers.

Learner-centered instruction not only values the teachers and their roles, but also instructs learners to take responsibility of their own learning.

Typically, there are two interpretations of learner-centered approach: strong and weak. In the weak version, learners are responsible for their own learning and are encouraged to handle their learning more.

In the strong version, it is argued that, from the onset, the learners have a right to be involved in the decision-making process in terms of what they should learn, how they should learn, and how they should be evaluated. Furthermore, in this process of learning, it is assumed that humanistic experiential notion is considered and the constructive role of the learners within the learning process is emphasized (4). Accordingly, one of the fundamental principles underlying the notion of permanent education is that education should develop in an individual the capacity to control their own destiny, by which the learner could gain the center of educational process (5). This viewpoint is a matter-of-fact in the ground rules of learner-centered instruction.

To establish this framework, it is important that the instructional programs be centered on the learners' responsibility in the choice of learning objectives, content, and methods as well as in determining the means used to assess their performance (1-5). Following the above points, the present study is an attempt to investigate the instructor's awareness and attitude toward learner-centered approaches, which have begun to change the style of teaching in the present era.

Methods

The participants of this research included 30 instructors (16 women, 14 men) of medical courses from different faculties of the University of Medical Sciences. Their academic designation ranged from that of lecturers to that of associate professors. These instructors were teaching in different fields, with average teaching experiences of 2–27 years. The instrument for collecting the data was a four-part questionnaire. This questionnaire had 13 items and was adapted from the study conducted by Serbessa (6). Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the results by using SPSS (version 11.5) for Windows.

The items of the questionnaire ranged on Likert point scale from "strongly agree" to "disagree" to "no idea" and were respectively coded for the analysis. The researchers went through all the questionnaires to investigate the peculiarity and preference of the instructors in their teaching job using either of the approaches. The frequencies and means were evaluated for this end.

Results

To account for the first part of the questionnaire concerning teachers' views on the implication of the learner-centered approach, which covered four items under a unique umbrella, the percentage of the means score in each item was evaluated (Table 1). In the first item of this part that indicated "at present lecture-based teaching is in accordance with curriculum and background knowledge of students", 41.4% teachers showed a positive attitude, while 17.2%

Table 1. Teachers' views on the implementation of the learner-centered approach

	No idea		disagree		agree	
	%	**No**	**%**	**No**	**%**	**No**
1. The lecture method teaching strategy is more situated to the current curriculum and students' background.	(17.2)	5	(41.4)	12	(41.4)	12
2. Most teachers use lecture method because it is the method they know well.	(3.3)	1	(6.7)	2	(90)	27
3. Students have adequate prior experience and understanding of active learning.	(10)	3	(50)	15	(40)	12
4. Students role is listening to lecture, note taking and response to questions upon request.	(3.3)	1	(60)	18	(36.7)	11

Table 2. Teachers' responses toward learning and resource requirement

	No idea		disagree		agree	
	%	**No**	**%**	**No**	**%**	**No**
1.The classroom setup is conductive for carrying out active learning	(16.7)	5	(66.7)	20	(16.7)	5
2. Learning resources are adequate for employing active learning	(20)	6	(53.3)	16	(26.7)	8
3. Number of the students appropriate for carrying out active learning..	(6.7)	2	(73.3)	22	(20)	6
4. Class size is appropriate for active learning	(16.7)	5	(50)	15	(33.3)	10

Table 3. Teachers' concern about active learning

	No idea		disagree		agree	
	(%)	**No**	**(%)**	**No**	**(%)**	**No**
1.Teachers recognize participatory learning	(20)	6	(60)	18	(20)	6
2.Staff qualification and experience are enough	(23.3)	7	(60)	18	(16.7)	5
3. Students' access to teachers' expertise may be decreased if active learning is used	(10)	3	(83.3)	25	(6.7)	2
4.Students participate to learn sufficient cont through active learning	(10)	3	(3.3)	1	(86.7)	26
5. Students rely mainly on notes and absorb facts, details and procedures related to exams only.	(3.4)	1	(31)	9	(65.5)	19

teachers did not have any idea. The second item confirmed that 90% of teachers used the lecture-based method because they had already received their own education through this model, 40% claimed that the responsibility of a teacher is teaching, and only 36.7% believed that the main task of students is listening to the lectures, taking notes, and (only if necessary) answering the teachers' questions. Equally important, 60% of teachers disagreed with this idea (Table 1).

Considering the second segment of the questionnaire, which clarified teachers' responses to learning and resources requirement and consisted of 4 parts, 66.7% teachers stated that the situation of classes were improper to administer an active learning method, 53.3% claimed that the resources for implementation of this method were not sufficient, while 73.3% stated that populated classes do not allow them to employ this approach (Table 2).

Table 4. General attitude to lecture-centered teaching method

	%	No
appropriate	13.3	4
moderate	33.3	10
weak	53.3	16

Table 5. General attitudes to active learning

	%	No
appropriate	16.7	5
moderate	23.3	7
weak	60.0	18

Table 6. Overall attitudes to the use of learner-centered approach

	%	No
appropriate	3.3	1
moderate	36.7	11
weak	60.0	18

With regard to the third part of our questionnaire, which consisted of 5 items and consequently focused on the reflection of the instructors' ideas on the use and application of teacher-centered active learning, 60% of teachers agreed that the instructors did not have sufficient amount of acquaintance with this mode of learning. Similarly, 60% of teachers believed that the instructors did not seem to have sufficient experience with this mode of instruction. Concerning the importance of availability of skills and expertise as well as the capabilities of instructors to learn, 83.3% of teachers expressed that, in this mode of learning, the students had all the capabilities of the instructors, while 86.7% stated that, through this approach, the students can access adaptive materials and subjects.

Based on the knowledge that students feel distressed about their final marks and judgment based on it, 65.5% instructors confirmed that they are more concerned about the points related to their exam marks and, accordingly, pay more attention to the notes they took and the pertinent details concerning their final exams (Table 3).

Furthermore, as illustrated, Table 6 considers the viewpoints of instructors on using active learner-centered instruction. It received 60%

opponents in contrast to 3.3% who consider this approach as fair or good. Meanwhile, 36% of instructors had a moderate idea of the application of this mode of instruction in their classes (Table 6).

Tables 1–3 depict the supportive outlook of the respondents to the traditional teacher-centered mode of instruction.

Discussion

Twenty-first century classrooms challenge the traditional teacher-centered curriculum to meet the increasingly diverse needs of students and to augment their achievement grades. The fundamental and basics of learner-centered approaches can be traced back to constructivism. Most importantly, if learners know why they learn what they are learning, adjust their learning to their needs, and learn in order to solve the problems at hand, learning will be more effective. The goal here is to achieve active exploration, construction, and learning, rather than passive learning without any involvement (7). Our research findings address some important ideas. The first idea is related to the employment of traditional lecture-based classroom. Our results indicated that the dominant teaching style of the university was traditional-oriented (Table 1, item 2). This result accords with those in the previous studies that report that majority of teachers were in favor of teacher-based instruction. For instance, Conti (2004) concluded that the teacher-centered style is currently the dominant approach at all levels of instruction in North America (8).

In parallel, learner centeredness as a module for classrooms is offered by some researchers because of the observation of diverse needs of assumed learners and, subsequently, locating the learners at the heart of the classroom where their needs, strategies, and styles are respected (9). Throughout our study, such findings are picturesque and depict the extremely wary attitudes of instructors to the approaches they apply in the instructional settings. According to Quirk (10), a learner-centered approach is aimed at

helping students, faculty, and administrators to succeed in their roles within medical education. The author argued that students are often forced to resort to learning of a multitude of facts that are not important to remember in the long run and are in fact required only to pass an exam. Quirk suggests that, to foster truly effective training of physicians, medical educators must shift their focus away from short-lived medicine toward a lifelong, accurate, self-directed learning that is required for competent clinical practice (10).

Generally, a theory usually has advocated learner-centered approach due to innumerable merits, whereas, our study (in accordance with several other previous studies) indicates employment of teacher-centered styles in the real world. The reasons for this gap may be many. An initiative that is instantly evident is insufficient predisposition of the teachers toward this style and their inadequate acquaintance with it.

The results of the second segment of our study revealed that the accommodations, situation, learning resources, number of students in classes, and the size of classes did not make way for the instructors to apply or at least examine this mode of instruction.

Meanwhile, the result of the third section suggests that instructors did not have ample awareness or knowledge about learner-centered approach.

Implications

A conflict apparently exists between what learner-centered approach demands and what the actual situation allows. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the theory and practice. Theoretically, learner-centered approach is progressively emphasized, while, pedagogically, the actual use of this approach seems unreal. To solve this conflicting problem, new endowments must be followed in the shift toward learner-centered pedagogy, as suggested below:

Training. The dominance of teacher-centered practices does not provide a solid basis for learner-centered activities. In fact,

teachers should be trained and the process of training should not be stopped, rather should be restricted to emphasize the importance of this method.

Curriculum. The process of changes in the teachers' speculations and perceptions is insufficient, irrespective of the basic need in the curricular renovation, which is assumed to bring about the change.

Students' awareness and attitudes. Students who have been accustomed to and regularly exposed to traditional approaches may resist the learner-based approach. The institutions, along with teachers, will need to warily orient the students to the basic functions of a classroom.

Teachers' motivation. Similarly, teachers may be reluctant to adopt this approach as it places a new burden on them in terms of their effort, time, and abandonment of their comfort zone. Therefore, teachers should be provided assistance and encouragement in attempting new ideas and materials. This step can be achieved mainly by conducting service teacher education programs. The teachers ought to be provided adequate help and consultation to retrain and refresh their ways of instruction.

Our study suggests adoption of learner-centered approaches in education and its implementation in real-life situation.

Furthermore, all teachers should be adequately equipped with resources to widen their pedagogical knowledge in order to cope with the diverse needs of their learners throughout the implementation of learner-centered approach.

References

1. Liu R, Qiao X, Liu Y. Qiao Paradigm shift of learner-centered teaching style: Reality or illusion?, University of Arizona, Arizona working papers in SLAT. 2009;(13):77-91
2. Nunan D. Second language teaching and learning. heinle and Heneile pubishers;1999.
3. Allwright RL. Why don't learners learn what teachers teach,IRAAL: Dublin 1984.
4. Brundage DH, Mackeracher D. Adult learning principles and their application in program

planning. Toronto Ontario Institute for studies in education. 1980.

5. Brindley G. Needs analysis and objective setting in the adult migrant education service, Sydney: NSWADULT Migrant education service. 1984.

6. Serbessa Derebssa Dufera. Tension between traditionl and modern teaching learning approaches in Ethiopean primary schools. Journal of International cooperation in education. 2006;9(1):123-50.

7. Norman. DA, Spohrer JC - Communications of the ACM, 1996 – ldt stanford edu. 1996;39 (4):2-15.

8. Conti GJ. Identifying Your Teaching Style. In Galbraith, Michael W. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company. 2004;76-91.

9. Altan MZ, Trombly C. Creating a learner-centered teacher education program. Forum. 2001;39(3):28-35.

10. Quirk M. How to learn and teach in Medical school? A learner centered approach. School of Nursing medical college of Ohio, USA. 1996.