

A relatively new teaching approach has taken hold at Creighton. Described as “learner-centeredness,” this new approach puts the focus on students.



Front and Center

By Anthony Flott

Emily Neneman saw the difference for herself last fall when talking about the letter *B*.

A Creighton senior and teaching assistant, Neneman was working with kindergartners at Liberty Elementary School, most of them Latinos learning their first formal English. There were no phonics, though. No whole language, either. Instead, there was shaving cream. And clay.

"It was so neat because I would have the students come up to the board and write the letter *B*," Neneman recalls. "We had an interactive discussion on the letter, then they went back to their desks and each student was given a little blob of shaving cream on their desk and they made the letter *B* in the shaving cream. Then we gave them clay, and they made the letter *B* with clay."

Neneman was engaging students not in the traditional "teacher as preacher" mode, but in an increasingly popular approach called "learner-centeredness."

"There were letter *B*'s just popping out all over the place," she says with detectible glee. "They had so much fun with it, and they didn't even realize they were learning. Having hands-on learning and that engagement truly allows them to understand so much more."

Learner-centeredness isn't limited to kindergartners practicing their ABC's, though. The philosophy is taking root at Creighton, impacting freshmen through professional school attendees.

Not quite a teaching revolution, it's at least a teaching evolution, a departure from the way in which thousands of Creighton students of yore were taught. It appears in various guises: students leaving the classroom to interview strangers in a mall, then reporting their findings in class; personal response devices instantly recording and displaying student comprehension following a "mini lecture"; student-led discussions, student teams, hands-on materials and more.

It's an approach, says Scott Chadwick, Ph.D., Creighton's associate vice president for Academic Affairs, that will help Creighton "adapt rapidly and decisively to changes in our students' learning preferences and techniques."

Even better, he adds, "It wasn't designed to be Ignatian, but it is. The fundamental assumption is that students learn by attaching new ideas and skills to their experiences. It recognizes learners as human beings in some stage of development."

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associate vice president
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What is it?

Defining learner-centeredness perhaps is best accomplished by defining what it is not. It is not teacher-centeredness, the extreme of which, says Chadwick, "is to be concerned about teaching and not learning. An example would be a teacher who goes in and talks at students for 50 minutes with no time for questions and answers, discussion, peer work. The focus is entirely on whatever the teacher thinks is important."

Mary Ann Danielson, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies, says such an approach is akin to cartoons where a head is opened, content is poured in and the head closed again. "That just doesn't happen," she says.

Learner-centeredness, says Creighton professor Isabelle Cherney, Ph.D., a cognitive psychologist and researcher in the scholarship of teaching, reflects a better understanding of how people learn. "It emphasizes active rather than passive learning. Individuals learn best by being actively engaged with the information/material, by building upon their existing knowledge and personal experiences, by caring about the material, by thinking critically about the material, by interacting with the instructor and other students."

It, too, has an extreme. Chadwick cites it as a room of self-directed students "who know why they want to learn and what they want to learn, and the teacher would do whatever is necessary to help those students learn." That, he concedes, is unrealistic. "We can't expect students to be there. The reality is somewhere in between."

There in the middle, he says, Creighton is striving to optimize learning through five aspects of learner-centeredness.

1. Balancing power. "The focus of learning is on students, not teachers," Chadwick says, "so classes are about student learning, not teaching. This means teachers become facilitators of learning. Once teachers become facilitators as opposed to the sage on stage or the talking head, it does shift some of the power to the students."

2. Centering responsibility. Learner-centeredness "shifts the responsibility to the students," Chadwick says. "They have to actively engage in the learning process with the teachers."

3. Promoting more than facts. Teachers must transmit facts, Chadwick says, but that's not enough. "They're there to promote or facilitate learning. There's so much more to it than just talking facts to the students."

4. Learning for life. "Content is a means to an end. What we strive for is that students master content, just as everyone else tries to do, but also through that process, they learn how to learn for life. They learn how to apply content in Ignatian ways."

5. Assessing always. "We ought to know what we want the students to learn, and then teachers assess students to see if they've learned that. They

◀ Learner-centered teaching focuses on the individual learning style of each student. Above, foreground, is Creighton student Elizabeth Hilpipre, a junior from Watertown, S.D. Background, from left: sophomore Marisa Goodrich, Des Moines, Iowa; sophomore Chase Sokol, Elkhart, Ind.; sophomore Kathleen Glow, Omaha; and senior Caitlin Conway, Omaha.

(students) feed back information to improve the course or the major. We use assessments as a continuous process of improvement for student learning.”

Taking Root

Chadwick says learner-centered teaching “coalesced out of a variety of different educational paradigms” that took root in the 1980s but “hit its stride” in the 1990s. Its implementation on college campuses, he adds, was led by a handful of small, private liberal arts institutions like Minnesota’s Carleton College and Iowa’s Grinnell College. Engineering schools also were early adopters, a reflection, Chadwick says, that engineers “have to learn how to learn and how to adapt. How to be part of something bigger than their field.”

Learner-centeredness, he believes, began taking root at Creighton about eight years ago. It is not mandated at Creighton, though Chadwick says the University has “such amazing teachers who care about student learning that this is a natural for them.” When asked how many Creighton teachers are using its techniques today, Chadwick replies, “Almost all. There are so very few that are just straight lecturers. You have early adopters and then build critical mass. Once critical mass is built, you ramp up very quickly. I think we’re in the stage where we’re ramping up very quickly.”

Danielson estimates that at least half of the communication faculty are strongly learner-centered and another 25 percent are transitioning toward it. And though she admits that her department is atypical, she adds, “There are faculty in virtually every department on this campus who employ this type or model of approach to education.”

Chadwick says many new faculty arrive already familiar with learner-centeredness, an observation seconded by Cherney, who credits programs in place at universities readying doctoral students. “As they come to learn the teaching and learning culture here,” she adds, “some powerful synergies emerge.”

Methods in Action

To see how learners are put at the center of a classroom, consider the way Danielson begins a course. On Day 1, she asks her students about their expectations.

Then she waits.

“Of course, there are just blank looks,” says Danielson, whose syllabi refer to her not as a professor or instructor, but as an “educational facilitator.” “They believe if they wait long enough, the teacher will supply the answer.”

Danielson doesn’t, instead offering only prompts about the class title or asking what they might have heard through the student grapevine. “I have to prime the pump a bit sometimes to get them started in Day 1,” she says. “Then when I come back in with other things I can use more of a discussion-oriented lecture style and they’re not surprised when I start off asking them questions and looking at them and waiting for them to respond.”

Cherney, meanwhile, put learner-centered techniques to use in her honors introductory psychology course via a “ticket-in” activity. Students were provided questions about a particular subject and asked to critically evaluate/reflect on one of them prior to reading associated chapters. Access to the class was the written “ticket-in.” The summaries students provided allowed Cherney to evaluate their level of understanding of a particular subject and to deliberately address areas of weaknesses. It also provided her with fodder for class discussions.

“Having the students reflect upon their own experiences made the material more meaningful to them,” says Cherney. “In their evaluations, they mentioned how these weekly exercises helped them better understand the material and themselves.”

Chadwick, meanwhile, points to technology’s role in learner-centeredness, citing a physics professor who gives a mini lecture then poses a question to his students about that lecture with several options as answers. Students log their answers on a personal response device and the class results are displayed on a screen. The teacher then directs “pair and share” — students teaming to discuss which answer is

correct then sharing their observations in an ensuing discussion. The professor eventually gives the correct answer and any further explanation needed.

Some wonder if all of it is rigorous enough, especially when it comes to grading. Chadwick addresses such concerns by talking of assessments in two ways: (1) What is being learned and (2) how it is being learned.

As for the former, Chadwick insists, “The grading criteria is as rigorous as it’s ever been.” In fact, he adds, “What we find is that more students are learning more. What happens is grades move up because students are learning more, not because we’re grading easier. I might argue that over time you can actually make grades more rigorous, raise the bar even higher, and the students will still get there, which makes us even more of a premiere institution.”

Learner-centered teachers, though, also assess the process of learning during a course and at its completion. “Various assessment techniques,” says Danielson, “give me a way to get immediate feedback about student knowledge or where their questions are as we go along the way.” Gail Jensen, Ph.D., a professor in physical therapy, calls such self-assessments “windows into their learning I don’t get from an exam or even a paper” and lead her to tweak her course each year as a result.



Cherney goes even further, asking students to meet several months after a course's completion to discuss "what concepts they had internalized. This assessment showed what a profound impact the course had on the students. They all remembered the many active exercises and the concepts that I wanted them to acquire. They also mentioned how their attitudes and behaviors had been changed because of this course."

Struggles

Changing from a teacher-centered to learner-centered classroom can be difficult for both teachers and students.

For teachers, says Danielson, the most difficult part of the transition is, to some degree, "giving up control of the classroom" — control over content, how much time is spent on it and what is discussed. "There's a real comfort in that," Danielson says. "You have a pretty clear sense of what's going to happen in your classroom." Now, she adds, teachers must ask themselves, "To what degree am I willing to turn over some of that learning? Am I willing to put the students in the driver's seat in terms of determining where we're going to go?"

Some faculty want to stay behind the wheel. After all, it's the only car they've ever driven — or ridden in. "One of the old adages in teaching," says Jensen, "is people teach the way they were taught." For them, she adds, it's important to convey the idea of a classroom as an experiment, not as a grade-generating machine. "They can bring their research and inquisitive skills into the classroom and you can really hook them that way. It's just like working in the clinic, like working in the lab. You're trying to figure out the best ways for students to learn."

Some teachers are skeptical of content's role in learner-centeredness, fearing a lack of quality and quantity. Jensen counters by pointing to research indicating that teachers who are more comfortable and have more



Photo by Mike Kleveveter

Through the use of personal response devices, like the one shown above, Creighton professors can quickly measure how each student is understanding the class material.

expertise teach less content. "The most common mistake," she adds, "is we try to teach too much." Chadwick tells his professors that under a learner-centered approach students "will learn more, they'll learn more quickly, and they'll integrate it into their being."

Other teachers assert that they know what is best for the student. Still others fear it's just a fad. "They've been around long enough to see things come and things go," Danielson says. In particular, she adds, some have a fear that the learner-centered classroom caters to a consumer model of education, teaching them not what they need to know but what will make them happiest and most likely to return as a customer.

Other professors might want to change, but don't know how. That's where Chadwick's office comes into play, providing workshops that offer learner-centered techniques and theories. Cherney adds that more conferences also are adding training to their agendas.

The change isn't always easy and certainly will take time. "Now, a certain amount of learning is part of their job," Chadwick says. "But to really do this as well as we all want to do it, it takes considerable time to learn, practice, build assessment" — with no decrease in other responsibilities or extra compensation, at least monetary compensation.

"Research shows that teachers are more satisfied and enjoy teaching more taking this approach," Chadwick says.

Students Adapt

Finally, we come to the students. Strange as it might seem, even they can struggle adapting to a classroom where they are front and center. Their concerns are similar to those of faculty, only from an opposing perspective.

Like control of the classroom: "For many of them it is a completely foreign experiment," says Danielson. "They're not used to the professors asking them what they think or sharing what they think."

Many of them have learned to learn passively; active participants are rare.

Switching between learner-centered and teacher-centered classrooms also can cause angst. And, like teachers, students have concerns about content. Many like what and how materials are presented and have become adept at memorization. But memorization, notes Jensen, "is not understanding. Understanding means students create a knowledge structure that is their own. They can see how major concepts or ideas fit together."

Adds Chadwick: "They're in for a paradigm shift toward making them central. And the paradigm shift also moves them from just being content experts to being content experts and knowing how to apply this in life. Once students get it, once they make that switch, they're sold."

Just as Emily Neneman was sold — first as a student and now as a teacher. This fall, she's implementing learner-centered principles as an assistant with second-graders at Millard's Aldrich Elementary.

"Growth truly comes from engagement with the students," Neneman says. "They teach us to be engaging teachers, to get your students out of their seats, get your students moving. You need to have your students see themselves in the lesson.

"From my own experience, from Day 1 at Creighton, that's exactly what they taught us to be like." ●

About the author: Flott is a freelance writer living in Omaha.

◀ Chadwick explains that with learner-centered teaching, students take a more active role in their education, with faculty serving as facilitators to learning.