THE CHANGING ROLE OF INSTRUCTORS AND LEARNERS
IN ADULT LEARNING SITUATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

With the occasional exception of the very early years of traditional schooling, by the time most of us have reached high school (about age 14), we have internalized the idea that learning is a process in which the teacher is in charge of the learning situation and our job is to take in what the teacher is teaching, behave ourselves (quietly), and demonstrate from time to time that we have learned what the teacher wanted through exams, papers, demonstrations, etc. In my experience, for most people, this teacher-centered relationship stays pretty stable throughout the rest of our formal schooling, even including graduate school. This paper describes the traditional teaching-centered role in use throughout most formal education institutions, provides a contrasting description of a learner-centered instructor role that is especially appropriate when teaching adults as learners, identifies some difficulties in implementing a learner-centered approach, and offers some possible solutions to them.

Here is a list of role descriptors that seem to represent the traditional teacher or instructor role. (Items in the list are numbered only for ease of reference during discussion of the points.)

A. TRADITIONAL TEACHER OR INSTRUCTOR ROLE

The role of the teacher in the traditional schooling circumstance described above seems to be to:

1. Control the behavior of the learners in the classroom. When students are uncooperative, the teacher's role is to mete out discipline when necessary.

2. Be aware of the approved content curriculum that is required by the school and the agencies that govern the school.

3. Organize the content that is to be transmitted to the learners into manageable units in a logical sequence.

4. Determine appropriate ways to present information and provide resources for learners to acquire the knowledge and skills that are included in the approved curriculum.

5. Measure student learning, evaluate the degree of mastery they have achieved, and issue scores or grades accordingly.

6. Cooperate with the school administration in the school's relationships with students' parents, the school's governing agencies, and other stakeholders in the school's effectiveness.

In contrast to this traditional teacher-centered role, I propose the consideration of some different role descriptors, especially when working with adults, including young adults, as learners. In the following

list I hope you will find that the emphasis is on being learner-centered, with the instructor serving as a guide, helper, resource, and facilitator of learning.

B. INSTRUCTOR ROLE AS A FACILITATOR OF LEARNING FOR ADULTS

When working with adults, it is important to recognize characteristics of adults as learners and adjust the instructor role accordingly. Here are some suggestions:

1. Assume that the learners are responsible for controlling their own behavior and learning.

2. Regard yourself as a facilitator of learning, with many tools and processes in your repertoire to make it easy and interesting for learners to learn.

3. Be an authentic person who is comfortable with yourself as a human being and as an instructor. Lead in the learning situation as if you had no title, rank, special position, or authority. Lead, instead, from your humanity and strength as a mature person who wants to help others learn.

4. Keep in mind that learning is best achieved in a collaborative process, one in which both the instructor and other learners are helping each other to learn to the maximum extent possible. Avoid creating competitive situations except when they are appropriate to facilitate learning outcomes.

5. In planning your learning sessions, be clear about how you want the process to unfold. Clearly understand in your own mind where it is imperative for boundaries to be rigid for purposes of learning (e.g., when running a simulation or structured exercise), and where there needs to be flexibility to make room for alternative activities that are relevant (e.g., subgroup discussions, Q/A periods, work groups).

6. Help learners to ask the right questions, broach the relevant issues, look in the appropriate resources, practice in the perfect ways, etc., to find the knowledge and build the skills they seek.

7. Use all of your experiences and knowledge in the service of the learner's need to learn. Present information, tell stories, give examples from your own experiences, sum up key points into coherent theory when possible, and build your points on insights and questions from learners.

8. Recognize it is more important for the learners to learn than it is for you to teach them. While it is your responsibility as the instructor to manage the learning environment and resources to the best advantage of the learners, assume the learner is in control of the learning and act accordingly. It is their job to learn and your job to help them do so.

9. When you have authoritative information, opinions, or examples that illustrate key points, offer them freely and with enthusiasm. Welcome challenges to your views as additive rather than contradictory. Consider that more than one perspective could also have merit.

10. When issues are controversial or undefined, lead the critical analysis process, facilitate questions and alternative perspectives, and help others examine the key issues. It's OK to say, "I don't know," or "That's an idea really worth considering" (if you really think so).

11. Design learning experiences to incorporate a variety of communication media, high learner involvement, and a pace that sustains interest through the entire time of the session.

12. Carefully plan and manage the process of the class session so that people with different learning styles and experience can all participate meaningfully (e.g., using Kolb's Learning Styles

Concepts as a guide, plan to provide time and structures for "Active Experimentation," "Concrete Experience," "Abstract Conceptualization," and "Reflective Observation").

13. Manage time boundaries with great care. Start as close to "on time" as possible. Avoid punishing those who are on time by waiting for those who are late. It is useful to begin each session with a structured Q/A from last session, review of earlier key points, or other process structures to engage learners who are in the room while waiting for late-comers to arrive. These brief "filler" exercises are especially useful when a case analysis or structured exercise is going to be used and, once begun, it is difficult to add a new member to a group or partnership without interrupting the flow of the learning. Always end sessions on time or a few minutes early.

14. Take breaks more often rather than less often. Some of the best reflection and sharing among learners happens during breaks. Individual students often use break times to ask specific questions they didn't want to raise during the session. Immediately following a break, I usually ask if any interesting points or questions came up during the break and often discover that spontaneous "teachable moments" occur during the brief discussions that follow.

15. Be sure to allocate enough time for discussions, exercises, debriefs, and examinations of experience to occur so that learning can be fully developed and participants can finish before ending the process. Be careful not to leave any exercise or process involving interpersonal risk until everyone has had an opportunity to learn all they can from it and are personally ready to move on to whatever is next in the program.

16. Many years ago I used to believe that pre-service students didn't have much experience so they would relate best to theories, and that more experienced in-service students wanted to hear actual stories from real work situations that they could relate to. After much reflection and teaching experience, I now think exactly the opposite. Inexperienced students need as many reality-based stories as they can get to help gather more experiences vicariously, while students with more experience really enjoy learning theories and conceptual frameworks that order and explain the many specific experiences that they have had. In a group of graduate students, I've learned to create various partnerships of inexperienced and experienced students together so they can learn from each other.

17. In situations where grades and other measures of learning are required, it is your responsibility to find appropriate ways to measure learning and assign values (grades, scores, etc.) to the results of those measurements. It is urgently important that measurement schemes be completely transparent to the learners and administered in an utterly fair manner. Keep in mind that the measurement process itself is an opportunity for continued learning for both you and the students.

DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

In practicing the role of adult learning facilitator, I have encountered some difficulties.

Students have learned too well to do what the teacher says.

Learners are often unaccustomed to working in a structure that involves them in a variety of processes rather than a content outline that they can study, memorize, and repeat on an exam. In the absence of specific content points to be "covered," it often feels to students that there is no structure and they become anxious and insecure. They're not sure exactly what they are supposed to do or how they can succeed in the program. What I have done in graduate courses to help with this difficulty is to prepare a highly detailed course syllabus describing the values on which the course will be operated, a

description of the processes that will be used in each course meeting, identify the printed resources and group activities that will be relevant to each session, define the measures of learning that will be used and what point values will be allocated to each aspect of the course and the relevant measures. Even with this detail, I have found that it still takes some students most of the term to adjust to this approach and to the degree of freedom they can have in their learning if they choose to exercise it. For example, I usually suggest that it is up to them to select a term project that will be most relevant and helpful to them in their work or lives and to use the experience of the term project for their maximum professional or personal benefit while keeping it relevant to the thrust of the course objectives. For a student who is taking a graduate course with me for the first time, it is not uncommon for them to look pleadingly at me and say, "Just tell me what you want me to write about, and I'll write it." It is important to avoid acceding to this need and, instead, to struggle with students' processes in determining their own topics (questions). This struggle is among the most challenging aspects of the role shift from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness. It's wonderful to have students come back and take a second course with me because, the second time around, they have learned-how-to-learn as self-directed learners and can't wait for the chance to get going on their term projects which they often have already selected even before the course begins.

Another aspect of student difficulty when applying adult learning methods in a graduate course is that students can't just read the text, take the exam, turn in their term papers, and pass the course. An MBA student bitterly complained to me once that he didn't know how he could skip class meetings and "cram for the exam" in the course as I had structured it. He was totally confused about how to approach the learning experience when asked to participate, think critically, reflect on his experiences, and generally be treated as an adult. That he actually was expected to be present at each of the course sessions and participate in them was a new experience for him in his entire graduate program. None of his other courses was operated like this one, he told me. He was still confused at the end of the term, never did understand his responsibilities as a learner, no matter how many times it was explained by me and other students, and, I suspect, "learned" that he didn't like this course (or me) at all. None of his dependent behaviors "worked" to help him be successful in this situation. His was an instance in which he was chronologically an adult, but hadn't really grown up yet. I imagine his next manager in the workplace found his inability to be self-directed was more of a burden than an asset.

Institutions have become too accustomed to the myth that they have exclusive control over learning.

Public schools and the government, in general, act as if they controlled what students learned. Nothing could be further from the truth. The learners always control what is learned. Even in higher education, departmental, school, and university requirements for syllabi often focus on the transmission of content in discrete appropriate units. Some university administrators and faculty members that I have worked with have thought that a learner-centered, process-oriented syllabus looks too vague as to the content that is to be "covered" (typically through lecture) and is unclear about how learning can be measured without predicting and outlining in advance everything that the learners are going to learn from the course and then testing the students to determine the degree to which they have done it. I have learned to do several things to help with this difficulty. Before starting a new teaching assignment in an academic program, I have learned to have a detailed discussion with the Department Head and/or Dean to discuss the differences between teacher-centered and learner-centered course structures. I show them examples of previous syllabi for courses I have taught. If I'm teaching a "departmental course," I discuss how the course will deal with the essential points that the department expects to be included and how I will measure these learning outcomes. If it is a new course – one I develop myself based on

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an assessment of emerging learning needs – I describe how the course will fit in with other courses in the program, build on their key points, and provide the opportunity for learners to expand their experience and understanding of the program overall.

Another key institutional concern that has developed in recent years is the issue of "grade inflation." Institutional leaders have put pressure on instructors to assure a "spread" of grades assigned among students. I have learned to clarify multiple criteria for measures that are used and to rigorously adhere to tough-minded and fair application of those criteria. While learner-centered courses generally produce more high-achieving learners, there is usually still a distribution of grades for the group simply because some students are willing to work harder than others. In the event that a student questions the assignment of a value (points, grades, etc.), I am always willing to provide detailed feedback to the student and to the institution's administration regarding the basis for my assigning the value. In more than forty years of graduate teaching, I have encountered fewer than ten students who were unreasonably insistent on pursuing a grade change in spite of my feedback. In no case was the original grade actually changed.

SUMMARY

When helping adults learn, changing how you think about the instructor role from teacher-centered to learner-centered is among the most challenging changes you may encounter in your life. It often feels threatening at a personal level to share power with learners, to refuse to impose authority for purposes of control, to be seen as vulnerable and as a co-learner rather than as an expert who is beyond challenging, to entertain opposing views even when they are ignorant without putting the learner down, to trade off the transmission of a short-term content point for the longer-term goal of creating self-directed learners. It means letting go of a key reason why some people go into teaching in the first place – to pass on what they have learned and make sure the students value it. Instead, learner-centered instructors, when working with adults as learners, will find greater success if their practice is based on intellectual humility, critical thinking, and honest feedback, and seeks always to help the learner outgrow the instructor so they can get to their own questions and their own answers on their own volition, and take over full responsibility for their own lives and contributions to the world.