

Observing the Learner-Centered Class

Michael Harris, Ph.D.
Kettering University

Roxanne Cullen, Ph.D.
Ferris State University

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Colleges and universities across the country are struggling with the issue of accountability, especially with regard to student learning. One attempt to revitalize undergraduate education and to respond to the calls for change is defined by a shift in the dominant pedagogy to a learner-centered focus. If academic administrators are to promote and facilitate learner-centered education, they must understand the current research on how students learn and the resulting changes that that knowledge brings to the classroom. One of the many issues related to this paradigm shift for academic administrators is the question of faculty evaluation. How will the evaluation of teaching faculty evolve in this new paradigm? Of the many facets of faculty evaluation that are part of the administrator's responsibility, classroom observation provides numerous challenges in the new paradigm. In this article, the authors consider how academic administrators might approach classroom observation in the new paradigm.

Keywords: Learner-Centered; Faculty Evaluation; Classroom Observation

The Shift to Learner-Centered

Colleges and universities across the country are struggling with the issue of accountability, especially as it regards student learning. In *The Future of Higher Education* (Newman, Couturier, and Scurry, 2004), a report on the Futures Project conducted by Brown University, the authors reported on a four-year examination of the major forces impacting the future of higher education. The Futures Project investigated the impact of competition and market values on higher education, targeting three specific areas: autonomy and accountability; responsibility for student learning; and access and attainment. The authors called for institutional responsibility with regard to student learning. They claimed that, at most institutions, "there is an unspoken, comfortable conspiracy between faculty and students not to bother each other too much; mediocrity reigns." (p. 136)

A similar claim was made in the collection of essays and accompanying documentary that comprised the PBS production, *Declining By Degrees: Higher Education at Risk* (Hersh and Merrow, 2005), which exposed a lack of accountability for student learning and an unhealthy focus on research and athletics as well as other prestige factors that had little to do with educating students. Even more candid was Lewis' (2006) indictment of undergraduate education, in which he claimed that universities have forgotten their purpose; namely, creating educated adults who will take responsibility for their society. In the same vein, Bok's (2005) critique of higher education's shortcomings focused both on the failure of

universities to prepare citizens and the need to improve teacher quality because not enough attention is paid to pedagogy. These numerous critiques of the state of higher education have clarified the issues at hand; what is now needed are concrete mechanisms for effecting change.

One attempt to revitalize undergraduate education and to respond to the calls for change is by shifting the dominant pedagogy to a learner-centered focus and supporting an emphasis on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Efforts to refocus undergraduate education to be more learner-centered have been driven by a new understanding about how humans learn; this understanding is drawn from neuroscience, biology, and cognitive psychology. We know more than ever before about how people learn, what inhibits learning, and different kinds of learning.

One of the oddities of the tradition of higher education is that professors are rarely provided any instruction or professional development in the role that represents a major element of their responsibility: teaching. Likewise, tenure, promotion, and merit have historically been tied to activities other than teaching as some hold the belief that teaching is not valued as much as research and that good teaching can't be measured or, conversely, that everyone's teaching is equally acceptable. Tradition and acceptable practice have dictated that knowledge of a specific discipline was sufficient for the transmission of that knowledge to students. However, our new understanding of what constitutes effective learning has prompted an unprecedented discussion of pedagogy on campuses, whether two-year, four-year, public and private, or nationwide

Discussion of teaching and learning as an academic, scholarly endeavor has become an acceptable conversation on college campuses. Huber and Hutchings (2005) write in *The Advancement of Learning*:

For most of the history of higher education in the United States, the form and content of the curriculum have been the most common sites for realigning college studies with changes in the larger social and scholarly worlds. What makes today's situation unusual is that pedagogy has finally slipped off the cloak of tradition and like other institutions of cultural transmission that are no longer taken for granted, become 'controversial, conscious, constructed: a matter of decision, will and effort' (p. 7)

While the discussion of pedagogy has become an acceptable conversation on college campuses, there is still much work to be done in clarifying what is meant by the scholarship of teaching, as well as defining the means for assessing the quality of that scholarship. Kreber and Cranton (2000, p. 477) provide background on the emerging views of this scholarship, identifying three perspectives: a traditional conceptualization, a view that equates scholarship with teaching excellence, and scholarship as the application of educational theory to practice. The authors propose an understanding of the scholarship of teaching as an approach that unites learning about teaching with demonstration of the application of new practices. The model they offer serves as an important point of clarity for those in the rather ambiguous position of assessing the quality of teaching and learning. While various constituents are finding themselves in this position (tenure review committees, promotion and merit committees, faculty developers), our focus will be on academic administrators who have the responsibility for supervising teaching faculty.

Leadership Development

We are engaged in a discussion regarding efforts to make undergraduate education more intentional by moving toward a learner-centered paradigm. While this is encouraging, it is crucial to acknowledge that most of the effort and literature on the learner-centered paradigm and the scholarship of teaching and learning have necessarily focused on strategies for faculty. It is equally important for academic administrators to consider the impact of the paradigm shift on their roles. Such a focus will be more successful in facilitating the paradigm shift. The need for leadership development in higher education is becoming a recurring theme. While we pointed to the fact that more often than not, new faculty are hired with no previous teaching experience or formal knowledge about pedagogy, the same is true for administration. All too often faculty members move into administrative positions with no preparation for their new roles. In the *Futures Project: Policy for Education in a Changing World*, Newman, Courtier, and Scurry (2004) called for institutions to meet the changes and challenges and competition for survival by investing more in leadership. They note that “higher education is one of the few sectors of society that does not focus on a constant effort to find and develop leaders.”(p.199)

One key feature of this leadership development must focus on the paradigm shift to learner-centered teaching. If they are to lead their institutions and the paradigm shift, academic administrators must have a thorough understanding of the learning-centered paradigm. If they are to promote and facilitate learner-centered education, they must understand the current research on how students learn and the resulting changes that that knowledge brings to the classroom. One of the many issues related to this paradigm shift for academic administrators is the question of faculty evaluation. Imagine a faculty member that embraces a learner-centered teaching practice being evaluated by an academic administrator who knows nothing about learner-centered teaching and, therefore, is not supportive of this effort and may be hostile toward it, as it does not look like what has been traditionally valued as good teaching. On a very practical level, academic administrators will need to understand, embrace, and advocate learner-centered teaching if this model is to move beyond the periphery of the institution and become mainstream pedagogy. Also because academic administrators will have the job of evaluating learner-centered teachers and must deal with students’ resistance to the pedagogy, they must be well versed in the learner-centered process. How will the evaluation of teaching faculty evolve in this new paradigm?

Faculty Evaluation in the New Paradigm

The metrics of faculty evaluation have been a source of discussion and contention for decades. Faculty evaluation in the 1970s was primarily formative in nature. Seldin (1984) conducted surveys in the 1970s and early 1980s identifying how faculty evaluation was being conducted. He found that quality of teaching was determined primarily by student ratings, course syllabi and examinations. (p. 19) Centra’s surveys (1979) revealed similar findings. The three most influential indicators, according to the survey, were department chair evaluations, student ratings, and colleague opinions. The chair and dean evaluations were held in the highest regard and Centra found that those judgments were most often based on student ratings. (p. 8)

Since the 1980s, however, teaching evaluation became less formative in response to public demands for accountability. The use of student ratings is widespread. Ory (1991) reported that three providers of student rating systems (IDEA: Kansas State University; ICES: University of Illinois; and SIR: Educational Testing Service) were reporting significant increases and that comprehensive and systematic approaches to teaching evaluation were continuing to grow. (p. 2) However, student ratings offer only one means of evaluating teaching performance.

Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do* (2004) reports on years of research on college campuses, studying the pedagogy of the very best teachers. Many of the qualities that Bain identifies as characteristics shared by these outstanding teachers, regardless of their discipline, are not easily quantifiable. According to Bain, the best teachers recognize that intelligence is expandable; in other words, they believe that students can learn. They know their subjects extremely well and are active scholars whether or not they publish. They create environments that are supportive yet challenging and have a strong trust in students. They care about student learning and about deep knowledge, recognizing that their job is not to grade students, identifying their level of understanding, but to motivate student learning. How does an academic administrator begin to assess these qualities?

While these qualities may not be easily quantifiable, they are certainly identifiable and, in most cases, observable. They cannot be measured exclusively by observation or student survey, although those mechanisms can and should play a part. In their work, *Assessing Faculty Work* (1994), Braskamp and Ory discuss faculty assessment in terms of the Latin root of the word, meaning *to sit beside*. (p. 15) They use this as a metaphor for formative assessment of faculty work. This metaphor provides a helpful starting point for thinking about assessing learning-centered teaching, as it requires collegial and thoughtful discussion and examination of the process and the outcomes. It also requires academic administrators to be well versed in the learner-centered paradigm. Bain writes,

Ultimately the process depends on how well the evaluators understand human learning. It requires faculties to talk about the nature of learning in the field and begin to craft an epistemological literature in each discipline and course. It demands attention to the science of human learning, to the vast and growing body of research and theoretical literature on how people learn, what it means to learn, and how best to foster it. (p. 170)

Academic administrators must develop their understanding of current research in teaching and learning in order to effectively lead the paradigm shift. If the administrator is to *sit beside* the faculty member and have a thoughtful discussion of the faculty member's teaching, the administrator must have enough background to know the questions to ask, as well as the advice to offer. Not surprisingly, the current research on learner-centered teaching is reflected in the four over-arching qualities that Bain found in his research on the practices of the very best teachers. These four qualities can serve as the framework for effective faculty evaluation in a learner-centered environment.

First, the best teachers believe that intelligence is expandable, that students can learn. One would think that in higher education this would be a given. Truly believing this, however, runs contrary to many attitudes and preconceptions that teachers *and students* hold about their ability to learn. Expert teachers can create conditions whereby students who

claim to have never been able to learn math, for example, can learn math or out-perform their ability as predicted by the SAT or ACT assessments. Too often teachers and students believe that intelligence is determined at birth; that it is fixed and unchangeable. Research (Gardner, 1983; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Covington, 1992; Conway, Perfect, Anderson, Gardiner, and Cohen, 1997; Dwek, 2000) has shown that this is not true. Teachers who understand this understand the role that background context or previous learning plays in a person's ability to learn new things; the function of repetition on brain patterns; the value of visual learning in contrast to other modes; and the value of performance (Sylwester, 1995; Marton and Booth, 1997; Leamson, 1999; and Zull, 2002).

Also required is a deep understanding of the subject matter on the part of the professor, which is the second of Bain's (2004) findings with regard to the best teachers. Professors with deep understanding of subject matter are more likely to find alternative ways of explaining concepts, have greater facility in creating meaningful metaphors and are able to provide meaningful rationale for learning. The use of metaphor and providing a rationale for learning are two components of the third quality of the best teachers identified by Bain (2004): the creation of supportive communities. While giving students a rationale for learning seems to make sense, there is also research on learning that supports this concept (Biggs, 1999; Entwistle and Entwistle, 1991; Ramsden, 1992; Langer, 1997; and Bowden and Marton, 1998). People are more likely to be receptive to learning if they believe that the information is relevant to their lives.

Furthermore, people are more likely to learn if they feel that they are in control of the process. Relinquishing control is key to creating a learning-centered environment and it requires the presence of the fourth characteristic of the best teachers as identified by Bain (2004): trust in students. Research has shown that motivation and self confidence are jeopardized by lack of control; the more teachers employ control measures, the more students are resistant to learning (Perry, 1997; Zull, 2002). By allowing students to share power in making decisions regarding activities, assignments, classroom policies, etc., students tend to take a more active and engaged role in their learning. They take ownership of and, subsequently, take responsibility for their learning.

While the evaluation of teaching according to these four qualities might initially appear subjective, there are, in fact, very specific and explicit ways of documenting and evaluating these teaching qualities. The evaluation requires multiple sources including classroom observation, discussion with the faculty member, a teaching portfolio that documents the courses taught, and student ratings. For academic administrators to effectively evaluate faculty, they must first develop their understanding of these components in the context of the learning-centered environment in order to know what to look for. The administrator has to have a rich enough understanding of teaching in order to assess the intentionality of the choices made by the professor and to understand and assess the wisdom of those choices. They will need to be sensitive to issues of power and control, about attitudes toward learning (both student and teacher), and to the many forms of assessment and evaluation and their uses in various contexts. They will need to know the language for writing learning objectives and learning outcomes. They will need to be familiar with techniques for active lecturing, problem-based learning, concept mapping, effective discussion techniques, and more.

Classroom Observation

Of the many facets of faculty evaluation that are part of the academic administrator's responsibility, classroom observation provides numerous challenges via the new paradigm. Classroom observation in the teacher-centered paradigm has established criteria that focuses on the *performance* of the teacher, including such things as clarity of presentation, lesson organization, student responses, etc. Even with clearly stated criteria for observation, Braskamp and Ory (1994) warn that untrained observers can be susceptible to personal style. (p. 202) How does one begin to evaluate the professor's control of the class, for example, when the point of the experience is for the professor to relinquish control? If students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, how does one evaluate the professor's role in that process?

Let us consider how we might approach classroom observation in the new paradigm. First, observation will not be a single fifty minute drop-in on a class. A pre-visit interview will be essential, as will a post-visit interview. The three components that should frame the overall evaluation are: 1) teaching philosophy or pedagogical stance; 2) competency in the discipline; and 3) teaching craft.

Teaching philosophy or pedagogical stance can be assessed through at least three data sources: a teaching philosophy statement, the course syllabus, and discussion about teaching. We have found that a review of the course syllabus prior to reading the teaching philosophy or having discussion with the reviewee is a productive strategy. A syllabus is more than an outline of a course; it represents the teacher's mindset, philosophy of learning, attitude toward students, and conceptualization of the course. It is also most often the first document presented to students and serves as an introduction to the course and the professor. For that reason we place considerable emphasis on the syllabus, reading it both from the perspective of the student, asking the question, "What is the initial impression the document will make upon the student and from the perspective of the academic administrator who is knowledgeable in the learner-centered paradigm?"

A review of the course syllabus can help the reviewer gauge the degree to which a professor is trying to develop a learner-centered environment. The key feature of learner-centered pedagogy is the shift from teaching to learning, with an emphasis on student learning rather than delivery of content. It follows that the syllabus should reflect those intentions; the syllabus is the introduction to the course, serving as an overview for how the course will unfold. Therefore, a syllabus for a course that is striving to be learner-centered should include some of the key elements that define the learner-centered approach, namely an attempt to create community, a sharing of power and control over what is learned and how it is learned, as well as a focus on assessment and evaluation tied directly to learning outcomes. The clear articulation of learning outcomes and clear methods for assessing those outcomes is a fundamental requirement of learner-centered pedagogy.

Accessibility of the teacher is a sign of interest in students' learning and willingness to participate in this community of learners. Accessibility of the teacher can be assessed through measures such as faculty office hours and availability via multiple modes of virtual access such office telephone, home telephone phone, e-mail, etc. More difficult to assess objectively is the overall language of the document with regard to attitude toward students and teaching. Is the language encouraging, inclusive, a first attempt at rapport in

establishing a community of learners, or is it language that serves to establish lines of authority and control? Does the teacher make any attempt to reveal his or her own background to the students? Is there evidence that there is shared control in the class? Are some policies and procedures left to the determination of the class as a whole? Are learning outcomes clearly stated and tied to assessment and evaluation measures?

A statement of philosophy could also be provided as a document to help the administrator prepare for the pre-observation visit through resources on the development of a learner-centered syllabus. Multiple sources of research (Weimer, 2002; Grunert, 1997; Beaudry and Schaub, 1998) recommend incorporating such a statement on the course syllabus.

The pre-observation interview would serve as the opportunity to *sit beside*, to establish a rapport between the observer and the observed. The discussion should cover both the larger issues of teaching philosophy as well as the craft of teaching and, if possible, an understanding of the discipline. (We recognize that some academic administrators are responsible for faculty evaluation outside their specific academic disciplines, which will necessarily impact the discussion of academic discipline.)

Prior to observing a class, the observer wants to know how the lesson being observed fits into the larger curricular scheme, both in terms of content and pedagogy and what the teacher is trying to accomplish. What are the learning goals for this specific class and what are the techniques being employed to achieve these goals? What will students be asked to prepare prior to class and what type of follow-up will there be for this work in subsequent class sessions?

One of the key attributes of the learner-centered pedagogy is understanding the students; what knowledge and attitudes do they bring to the course so that the teacher can adapt and link their current learning experiences to previous learning experiences, in order to achieve the best results? In order to begin to assess this, the administrator could ask questions to determine how well the teacher knows the students. Are students referred to by name? Does the teacher offer examples of the learning or background of individual students? Did the teacher conduct any sort of pre-course survey to find out information about the students? All of these inquiries are indicators of that more nebulous characteristic described by Bain (2004) as creating community and trusting in students.

The pre-observation interview can be a rich source of information regarding teaching philosophy, competence in the discipline, and knowledge of teaching craft. The actual observation, then, becomes an opportunity to validate the findings of the pre-observation interview. The observation will vary according to the pre-observation discussion. Ideally the administrator wants to walk into the classroom knowing what the learning outcomes are for that class period and what techniques will be employed. The observation is also an opportunity to assess the sense of community that has been established. From our experience in observing learning-centered classes we have found that if we participate in the class, our experience of the class is more genuine. For example, in observing a class, we found that if the teacher breaks students into groups to work on an activity, we are assigned to the group work just as any other student. In this way we have put ourselves in the role of the student and can better judge how learning is facilitated. We are also offered a glimpse of other students' reactions to learning on a more personal level. We also take part in class discussions as appropriate.

The post-observation visit is an opportunity to *sit beside*, to discuss what the teacher thought of the class, what worked well, what might be changed in the future, what didn't work, etc. The post-observation is the most demanding part of the process for the administrator, because it is at this point that true, in-depth discussion of pedagogical strategies will take place. Deep knowledge of learner-centered teaching strategies and learning theory is required. One way of approaching the post-observation discussion would be to ask: were the learning outcomes for that day met and how was that determination made? What method(s) of assessment were used to measure the learning for that class? This discussion can lead into a more in-depth discussion of the difference between assessment and evaluation; with assessment considered ongoing and formative and evaluation considered summative (final grades). Does the teacher use ongoing assessment to assure that learning is taking place? How does the teacher adjust in response to that ongoing feedback? If multiple observations are possible, is the post-observation visit the appropriate time to plan a subsequent visit(s)? Subsequent visits offer the opportunity to assess how the rapport of the class changes as the semester proceeds and it offers an opportunity to see how the teacher has adjusted to ongoing assessment of student learning.

Chickering (2000) defines teaching as "arranging conditions for learning." (p. 25) This very simple definition can form the basis of truly meaningful, relevant, and constructive evaluation of teaching. What has the professor done to arrange conditions for learning? What are the choices that have been made and for what intent or purpose? The resulting questions then become, were the choices effective, and how does the professor know? Faculty and administrators must take care to avoid what Astin (1999) warns against: a preoccupation with one's own techniques and processes, while overlooking what is actually going on with the student. For this reason the ongoing assessment of learning outcomes is an essential component of the learning paradigm and must hold a central position in the evaluation of teaching.

Conclusion

Ideally, the process for evaluating learner-centered teaching should reflect the same beliefs about learning that are applied to the student learning environment. There should be active involvement by the learner, in this case the teacher; there should be collaboration among peers toward a team approach to improved teaching; there should be multiple approaches to assessment that involve the supervising administrator, as well as colleagues, and, of course, the students.

Nearly a decade ago, Nancy Van Note Chism compiled *Peer Review of Teaching* (1999), content that can serve as a foundation for exploring peer evaluation of teaching. Her book provides a guide for informed peer judgment and also serves as a source for academic administrators who want to strengthen their system of evaluation. Chism calls for administrators to make teaching public, to encourage ongoing discussion of teaching, as well as to be exemplars of thoughtful and informed review of teaching. (p. 29) Again we are reminded that academic administrators need to be well informed in order to play a meaningful role in the process.

A necessary condition for the implementation of innovations in higher education, as in any field, is the ability of university administrators to facilitate and support the innovation.

In order to do so, academic administrators must have an understanding of and commitment to the transition toward a learner-centered pedagogy. This is especially true when institutional resources need to be committed to facilitate innovation through the curriculum and make it a part of the campus culture.

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Michael Harris is the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Kettering University. He is also a consultant-evaluator for the North Central Association and a certified appraiser for the Academic Quality Improvement Program.

Roxanne Cullen is a Professor of English at Ferris State University. She also serves as the Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Associate Vice President for Operations and Assessment.

Florida Journal of Educational Administration & Policy

Spring 2008
Volume 1
Issue 2

Observing the Learner-Centered Class

57 - 66

Michael Harris, Roxanne Cullen

To Test (or not) in Arena Settings

67 - 78

Derick M. Kiger

Enthusiastic Educational Leadership

79 - 97

Jill Frymier Russell

Challenges of the Public School Superintendency: Differences by
Tenure and District Location

98 - 109

*Daniel Trevino, Jr., Richard T. Braley, Michelle Stallone Brown,
John R. Slate*

Book Reviews

Accountable Teacher Evaluation! Toward Highly Qualified and Competent Teachers
by Andrews, H. A.

110 - 113

Diane Archer-Banks

Critical Issues for Student Affairs: Challenges and Opportunities by Sandeen, A. and
Barr, M. J.

114 - 119

David Horton, Jr.

Instructional Supervision Applying Tools and Concepts by Zepeda, S. J.

120 - 123

Karen Melvin

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