LEARNING - CENTERED ENVIRONMENTS: Curriculum, Pedagogy, Experience

With the advent of the recent interest in learning, there is a move to make classrooms, departments, and colleges learning-centered. A number of attempts to characterize those environments have already been published, but efforts to make clearer what is still implicit, ambiguous, and abstract need to continue. Into the hopper we toss the following way of delineating what is meant by making a class, department, or college "learning centered."

1. Being learning centered can be characterized curricularly. A college offers degrees in areas relevant to workforce needs, so that learners see the relevance of what is being proposed for study. The curriculum seeks to redress the content-process imbalance with more attention being paid in all courses to teaching students how to learn so that learning after college may continue. The curriculum is designed so that it focuses on learning, embedded in the content of discipline through which students track both what they are learning and how they are learning it. The curriculum is better integrated. What fits together and how it's related is better understood, and those connections are made clearly and explicitly to learners. The curriculum is designed taking into account developmental premises. Learners begin individual courses and curricula at one level and need to be moved to other levels, and so what happens in a first course in terms of assignments, expectations, responsibilities and challenges is not at all the same as what happens in an ending course. Faculty tackle developmental issues explicitly, no longer assuming that they occur naturally or inevitably as students progress through the college experience. The curriculum better bridges the theory-practice divide. Field work, observations, internships, co-ops, and service-learning opportunities become valid curricular components.

2. Being learning centered can be characterized pedagogically. The methods of instruction are collaborative and cooperative, so that students begin to understand that learning can and does occur in collective contexts. The methods of instruction are discovery based, with much less teaching by telling and much more learning by doing. The methods of teaching and learning are infused with technology, not PowerPoint as an electronic overhead projector and transparencies, but as the media through which students learn the lessons of information access, management, organization, and evaluation. The methods of instruction recognize the central role of the learner in the learning process. There is an attempt to involve and engage the learner in decisions that can legitimately be shared. The methods of instruction are more rigorously assessed against these criteria: How much and how well did students learn as a consequence of these methods?

3. Being learning centered can be characterized experientially. It's no longer about what happens in class versus what happens outside of class. It's about the totality and integration of a set of learning experiences that occur in different venues. It's not about academic affairs and student affairs as organizationally separate and distinct operations. It's about blending functions to the end of creating holistic, seamless learning environments where what happens in class is reinforced, elaborated, and applied by out of class activities and vice versa. It's no longer just about the content requirements of the major. It's about larger, more integrated, whole-person educational experiences. The fine-sounding rhetoric may still get in the way, but concrete examples to illustrate each of these descriptions abound in the higher educational literature today. You want to know how learning-centered your course or your college is? Start by looking at the curriculum, at the pedagogy, and at the relationship between academic affairs and student
affairs. If movement in the directions described above happens in each of those three domains, you will be a more learning-centered classroom and college.

*From the Teaching Professor, March 1999*