

Feature Book Review

Walking the Walk

Review of: *Learner-Centered Teaching*, by Maryellen Weimer; 2002; 288 pp.; Jossey-Bass (San Francisco, CA); ISBN: 0787956465

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Of the dozens of books about teaching and learning that I have read over the past decade, none has reverberated in my thoughts like *Learner-Centered Teaching*. This book confronted me with the great distance between my personal definition and practice of “learner-centered teaching” and the potential of a deeper, more authentic learner-centered approach. It confronted me with the lapses between my “talk” and my “walk” when it comes to attitudes toward students, course design, expectations, power, and many other aspects of teaching. It helped me think more creatively about helping students with diverse learning styles and needs to thrive in my classes. What makes this book so valuable and thought provoking?

Weimer begins her book with a discussion of her redesign of a communications course to be more learner centered. In this new course, students were provided with a menu of assessment options, so that specific decisions about how they would be evaluated were determined by the student herself or himself. Based on my own teaching experience, the initial response of Weimer’s students was predictable: They were stunned and uncomfortable, looking for the “catch.” They could not initially believe that they did not *have* to take the exams, but could earn their points in other ways. The ultimate response of her students was less predictable but not surprising in hindsight: Students became more engaged with the material and worked harder than they did in Weimer’s previous teacher-centered course. This anecdote, told in a pleasant conversational style, leaves the reader with a strong desire to design and teach similar courses, courses in which students find the content interesting and relevant, are animated in class discussions, and learn more effectively.

The course itself is also very interesting as a model for creative learning activities. For example, students in the class could earn points by “class participation.” Each class participant was paired with another participant, with each member acting as a participation “coach” for the other. The

class as a whole defined what class participation meant, and the participants earned their points by writing three papers: a paper outlining their participation goals in the context of the class definitions, a feedback paper to their partner about his or her class participation, and a self-assessment of his or her own participation. Such an assignment/assessment plan involving student coaches was delightfully new to me and made me consider other ways in which my students might participate in feedback to one another.

In the next five chapters, Weimer presents five changes that she believes are necessary to create an authentic learner-centered teaching practice: 1) shifting the balance of power more toward the student; 2) using (rather than covering) content as the means to achieve higher-order learning goals; 3) changing the teacher’s role from that of telling/doing to that of designing/modeling; 4) helping students accept the responsibility for learning; and 5) adapting the purpose and processes of evaluation to promote learning. Maintaining the highly readable, conversational writing style that draws you in at the beginning, Weimer elaborates on each of these changes in a separate chapter. Each chapter ends with a very effective summary paragraph that reinforces the key messages of the chapter. Because the chapters are short and focused and the key messages are restated at the end, the reader falls almost automatically into a pattern of intense reading, followed by reflection. In my case, the book was read over a couple of weeks of commutes in the “Campus Connector” between Minneapolis and St. Paul. It wasn’t that the book could not be read at one sitting. Instead, after reading each chapter, I found myself needing to internalize the information and to envision the changes that I might make to my own teaching. How should I structure my new seminar to give students more decision-making power? How could I help students assume greater responsibility for their learning? How could I design assessments that help students actually master the course content? How would students respond to these changes?

Although the first part of the book is essentially a detailed explanation of learner-centered teaching, the second part deals with how to implement the necessary changes to achieve that goal. Surprisingly, the implementation part of

DOI: 10.1187/cbe.06-05-0163

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the book was less valuable than the definition part. For example, as I'm sure the readers of *CBE—Life Sciences Education* recognize, changes such as those recommended above are likely to cause resistance from every quarter, including from both students and faculty colleagues. Weimer discusses where the resistance arises. For example, students resist learner-centered approaches because these approaches require more work, are more threatening than traditional teacher-centered approaches, force students to take responsibility for their learning, and may be difficult for some students. Weimer's answer to this resistance is communication with students. Thus, although the analysis of the source of resistance was valuable, the solutions appeared superficial. Nevertheless, this portion of the book forces faculty who are considering moving toward learning-centered teaching to understand some of the challenges that face them.

After reading this book and pondering on its message for several months, I returned to it recently and revisited key points. The ideas and conversational style still resonate with great power: the function of content as a vehicle for skill

building; the teacher as midwife, trail guide, or coach; the roles of self-assessment, formative assessment, and grades. Powerful ideas. Difficult ideas. Revolutionary ideas.

I reconsidered my own attitudes toward teaching: I envision my courses to epitomize the "guide on the side" style of teaching. I pat myself on the back as I include bits of active learning exercises or "clicker questions" at the midpoint of the 30 PowerPoint slides that I need to cover in that day's lecture. I'm proud of the tight organization of our courses that provide students with clear expectations from the time they enter the course.

Although these changes are authentic improvements since my first dismal teaching experiences (I'm still profoundly sorry for those first students!), *Learner-Centered Teaching* puts these efforts into an intense new light. It reveals that I still have a long way to go! Few books on education have had the impact of *Learner-Centered Teaching* on my thinking about how to be a better teacher. And, although I'm not yet truly walking the walk, I think I'm at least up on all fours and moving ahead.