

Student engagement policies and the subversion of ‘student-centred’ (0069)

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Introduction

Across the world universities espouse a commitment to student-centred learning (Frambach *et al*, 2014). Such sentiments are embedded in teaching and learning strategies and ‘engagement’ policies that emphasise the need for students to participate actively in class rather than being passive learners (eg Penn State University, 2013). Student-centredness has become a modern mantra of the global higher education curriculum premised on principles that define learning as an active and social process.

The idea of student-centredness stems from the work of a range of educational thinkers and psychologists, notably John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Their thinking might collectively be described as focusing on the centrality of individual autonomy and a belief in education as a social, creative and interactive process centred on the needs and interests of the child. In a higher education context, the work of Carl Rogers (1951; 1969) has probably been the most highly influential in establishing the term ‘student-centred’. Yet, Rogers’ emancipatory vision of student-centred is quite different from the way in which this phrase is interpreted by proponents of student engagement laying down behavioral expectations associated with a more authoritarian set of applications designed to maximise student and institutional ‘success’ (eg Kuh *et al*, 2008; McCormick & Kinzie, 2014).

What Rogers meant by ‘student-centred’

As an educational psychotherapist Rogers built his view of education on the concept of client-centred therapy arguing that teachers should start any educational process by considering the needs and interests of individual learners. For Rogers the aim of education is not teaching but the ‘facilitation of learning’ (1969:105). In explaining how his view of education built on the concept of client-centred therapy, Rogers stated his first, and perhaps most famous, hypothesis:

‘We cannot teach another person; we can only facilitate his learning’
(Rogers, 1951:389)

This part of Rogers’ work in explaining student-centred is well known. However, other aspects of how he conceived student-centred are less well understood. Rogers was committed to the principles of freedom and democracy as well as social constructivism. Above all, he saw student-centredness as an emancipatory and liberating concept which gave students control over how to learn. This meant that Rogers argued that students ought to be allowed to choose whether to learn in an active or more passive way. They should have the freedom to choose.

Indeed, student academic freedom was at the core of Rogers’ theory and conveyed by the title of one of his later books *Freedom to Learn* (1969). He believed that it should

be up to the student to determine the pace of their learning, at what level of difficulty, and how far they felt motivated to go in making progress (Rogers, 1969:17-18). Hence, student-centred learning is about giving students *autonomy* rather than prescribing a particular way of learning (ie actively). In *Client-Centered Therapy* (1951), Rogers had emphasised the link between student-centred learning and democratic principles counter-posing these with a prevailing educational culture which he characterised as much more authoritarian or teacher-centred. Rogers contended that ‘the goal of a democratic education is to assist students to become individuals’ (Rogers, 1951:387).

A powerful illustration of how Rogers understood a student’s freedom, which he refers to as ‘freedom from pressure’ (p 395), is contained in a statement from a student who wrote the following having just completed a student-centred course:

I feel completely free in this course. I could come in late and leave early. I could talk or be silent. I got to know a number of the students rather well. I was treated like a mature adult. I felt no pressure from you. I didn’t have to please you; I didn’t have to believe you. It was all up to me.

Rogers (1951:395)

For Rogers, student freedom was about the development of their ‘inner autonomy’ (1969:271). This involved students in having the courage to be free by developing their own personal meaning. He defined learning, to draw on the title of one of his other books, as about becoming a person. Hence, Rogers’ vision of student learning was diametrically opposed to a behaviourist stance, the dominant school of thought in psychology during the 1950s represented by the work of Skinner, Pavlov and others.

A disjunction

Rogers’ libertarian conception of student-centred is quite different from the way in which the student engagement movement seeks to deploy this phrase in legislating how students should learn at university. Unlike Rogers emphasis on student choice, student engagement policies normally include compulsory attendance requirements, class contribution grading, and other elements of curriculum and assessment regimes premised on surveillance of their time and commitment. This has required students to become ‘do-ers’ of learning (Holmes, 2004) leading to the routine assessment of academic non-achievement, such as attendance at class or a preparedness to take part in class or group activities. It has also led to non-conforming students being increasingly vilified as ‘passive learners’, ‘lurkers’, and ‘surface learners’ while the possibilities of ‘silent’ learning (Gulati, 2008; Jin, 2012) are overlooked.

Student performativity - bodily, participative and emotional (Macfarlane, 2015) - is a growing phenomenon in global higher education undermining both a genuinely student-centred curriculum and the rights of students – to privacy, to a freedom of expression which includes reticence (Chanock, 2010), or to engage as a learner in higher education as a voluntary process. In common with a number of other educational concepts (eg learning outcomes), student-centredness has been adapted and distorted in service to organizational objectives that are focused on efficiency and effectiveness to meet government-funded performance targets. A narrow and

authoritarian interpretation of student-centredness as active learning and performance has led to the phrase being associated with a ‘tyranny of participation’ (Gourlay, 2014: 402). Student-centredness needs to be reclaimed by higher education thinkers and practitioners in the way in which Rogers originally intended: as a liberating concept that promotes rather than impedes student freedom to learn.

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