Embracing student centeredness

Academic and teaching staff can adopt two orientations in their teaching: a teacher centred/content orientation or a student centred/learning orientation (Kember, 1997). At RMIT we promote student-centred learning approaches so it is important to be familiar with what it means to adopt a student-centred or learning orientation.

The term student-centred learning implies a conceptual shift from I will tell you this and therefore you will learn to I want to help you learn in ways which are effective for you and to meet your needs.

Transnational academic and teaching staff need to be aware that some students may be more familiar with teacher-centred approaches. When teaching in RMIT programs, part of your role will be to assist students transition from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach to learning.

Optimising the conditions in which all students can learn effectively is an important function of teaching. This requires you to:

• Create a psychologically safe learning environment
• Build supportive and constructive teacher/student relationships, and
• Accommodate the diversity of learning styles and needs that exist within your student group.

Creating psychologically safe learning environments

Students need instructional and emotional support to learn effectively and successfully. They need to:

• Feel comfortable with you and with other students.
• Feel that you and other RMIT staff care about their learning and success.
• Feel confident that they can take risks and will not feel shame or embarrassment when they make errors or display initial incompetence.
• Be confident that they will be treated fairly and with respect.
• Feel that there is sufficient flexibility in learning approaches that will allow for them to construct meaning in their own unique, individual way.
• Believe that they can be successful in the program.

"If we value independence, if we are disturbed by the growing conformity of knowledge, of values, of attitudes, which our present system induces, then we may wish to set up conditions of learning which make for uniqueness, for self-direction, and for self-initiated learning."

Carl Rogers
All academic and teaching staff must be sensitive to the impact that feelings of anxiety, shame and embarrassment may have on a student’s willingness to engage in classroom activities. If teaching in a transnational setting, you need to be aware that in many societies respect for seniority and the need to saving face may impact on the level of confidence students have in participating in some classroom activities. More information about how culture may impact on a student’s sense of psychological safety is available from the Transnational Teaching Quick Guide Approaching cultural diversity.

In 1968 Rosenthal and Jacobson demonstrated in their “Pygmalion in the Classroom” study that “teacher expectations can act as self-fulfilling prophecies because student achievement comes to reflect their expectations” (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996, p.347).

Students need to feel part of their learning community and you must create an atmosphere that encourages them to support one another in their learning. To create this sense of belonging in the group you need to encourage active communication between students through team work and communication activities, and through your own encouragement of them as part of your community.

Build supportive & constructive teacher/student relationships

A constructive teacher/student relationship is important for optimal learning. Students need to feel respected and that their learning needs are accommodated. It can be difficult to get to know all students personally if you have a large class however even when you have a large class it is worth paying attention to both the common and diverse characteristics of the student group.

When designing learning activities it is important to consider the diverse range of life experiences that students bring to the classroom. These life experiences will influence the way students process new learning; they will often search for meaning and analyse and interpret the concepts and ideas you present based on their past experiences and what they already know.

You can gain an appreciation of your students’ past learning and experiences by engaging them in dialogue about how their past learning and experiences may shape the way they think about the knowledge and information you present. Vella (2001) presents some useful ideas on how you can do this. Examples of questions or tasks you use include asking students to:

• Think about how the topic relates to their own life experiences.
• Identify something that stands out for them in the new knowledge presented.
• Underline key words they would like to discuss with the group.
• Engage in dialogue about the new knowledge.
• Engage in an activity that helps them to construct their own content.
Understanding differences in preferred learning styles

Along with diverse life experiences and considerable variation in students’ knowledge, skills, cultural background and levels of maturity, students also come to the classroom with a range of preferred learning styles. As a result teachers need to thoughtfully select a variety of learning activities and tools that will engage all students in learning.

A student’s preferred learning style will influence which learning activities they will respond best to so it is necessary for teachers and academic staff to use a range of learning approaches and activities.

Adult learning theorists Wolf and Kolb (1984) have provided useful models to assist understand the differences in learning styles. Wolf and Kolb’s model describes the four learning styles reflected in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style of Learner</th>
<th>Engagement strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activists</td>
<td>Respond to a challenge, new experiences and problems, excitement, sense of freedom in learning. To accommodate Activists design learning experiences that enable students to get involved in a hands-on, practical project. Structure learning activities allowing time to observe, reflect and think.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflectors</td>
<td>To accommodate Reflectors provide students with readings, case studies and examples. DVD clips and audio recordings that provide students with the opportunity observe or listen to others with a depth of experience in the field of study and then discuss their reflections can also be very useful. You might provide discussion questions to guide student reflection and discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theorists</td>
<td>Appreciate clear aims and logical structure with time for methodical exploration and opportunity to question. To accommodate Theorists provide lectures or presentations that logically outline theories and conceptual frameworks. Theorists also enjoy learning through reading well-research books and articles so it is worth providing additional readings or references for these students. Provide relevant and relevant and practical learning activities where theory can be put into practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style of Learner</td>
<td>Engagement strategy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatists</td>
<td>To accommodate Pragmatists provide succinct, practically-orientated readings. You may also need to help students put new learning to practical use. Pragmatists will respond well to real-life projects and like to get feedback and advice on specific things they can do to improve.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Cultural background

The cultural backgrounds of students will influence their expectations of teachers and how they engage in the classroom. A more in-depth discussion of ways of structuring classroom activities to accommodate cultural differences is available in the Transnational Teaching Quick Guide: Approaching Cultural Diversity.

Useful resources

Support is available from your Deputy Head of School (Learning & Teaching) or equivalent. Your College Academic Development Group or learning & teaching specialist can also provide advice, support and professional development.

RMIT University’s practical guides to teaching will help your plan and improve your teaching practice:
http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/practical


The Learner-Centered Teaching Series of the University of Oregon provides helpful links to a variety of discussions, strategies and tips on the student-centred teaching classroom:
http://tep.uoregon.edu/workshops/teacherteaching/learnercentered/learnercentered.html

RMIT’s video series “Perspectives on Learning and Teaching” presents short vignettes about student-centred learning, learner diversity, student engagement and preparing to teach: