



Components of Authenticity: STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING *K20 IDEALS*

The term “student-centered learning” is often used to describe a shift in teaching focus from the teacher to the student, emphasizing the student’s role in constructing their knowledge. Among the many aspects that shape student-centered learning, three key themes are student agency, scaffolded learning environments, and the cultural nature of learning.

Student Agency

Often used synonymously with student choice and voice, student agency refers to complex interactions between teachers and students in the classroom environment¹. These two-way interactions enable students to make choices in their learning that are informed by their beliefs, preferences, and learning needs². We can give students a voice in their own learning by creating an environment where students and teachers work collaboratively to co-construct new knowledge. This can be accomplished by combining students’ social, cultural, and personal knowledge with classroom experiences in order to create a common understanding that includes different perspectives³. In this learning environment, students receive support for self-regulation and self-reflection, which helps them create positive perceptions about their ability to take ownership of their learning⁴.

To develop student agency, the teacher must encourage, support, and empower their students as they work to become independent learners. As students set goals for themselves and make decisions based on those goals, it is the teacher’s role to ensure that the learning standards continue to be addressed⁵. This can happen when teachers provide a safe space for collaboration and discourse; honor students’ perspectives, values, and interests; provide opportunities for reflection; and let students make choices about all aspects of the learning process⁶. Examples of student choices include selecting a text (content), developing their own questions to drive and support inquiry (process), and choosing how they show mastery of learning (product).

Scaffolded Learning Environments

Scaffolding is the provision of guidance within the learning environment to help students participate

meaningfully at their own levels of skill, prior knowledge, and cultural experience⁷. It allows students to take increasing responsibility for their own learning as the teacher monitors their progress and adjusts the levels of needed support. These adjustments are made as students become familiar with the concepts related to a task and begin to use them on their own⁸.

Scaffolds can take many forms. At the start of a complex task, students may need support in the form of structures for activation of prior knowledge, task orientation, or organization of their approach to an activity. Examples include chunking the activity into smaller pieces, providing graphic organizers to establish current understanding or organize ideas, or providing guiding questions⁹. As students move toward higher-order aspects of the task, such as problem-solving, investigating, or collaborative reasoning, the support changes to give them more control over their learning¹⁰. Scaffolds might involve guiding students to: ask their own questions about issues or gaps in their understanding; identify problems and problem-solving steps; or collaborate to generate reasoned explanations or solutions¹¹. Students also increase their metacognitive regulation as they attempt to control and coordinate their own learning or the learning of a collaborative group¹².



The Cultural Nature of Learning

Culture is an important consideration in the design of student-centered learning environments. *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*¹³ defines culture as:

... the learned behavior of a group of people that generally reflects the tradition of that people and is socially transmitted from generation to generation through social learning; it is also shaped to fit circumstances and goals. (p. 22)

Students come to school with diverse knowledge and experiences. The environments in which they live, including home and school, form the basis for all of their knowledge and future understanding. This cultural knowledge affects how people make sense of the world around them and how they turn everyday experiences into meaningful events¹⁴. Studies show that students are better supported in taking control of their learning when teachers create an environment that recognizes cultural perspectives from outside the classroom¹⁵.

Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical approach that has been used to consider “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for students”¹⁶. Strategies for culturally responsive teaching include:

- Getting to know students and learning about their backgrounds¹⁷.
- Teaching cultural diversity, even when the class is not diverse¹⁸.
- Encouraging appreciation for diversity while acknowledging inequity¹⁹.
- Teaching from an asset-based perspective (what does the student do well) rather than a deficit-based perspective (what is the student lacking) to shift focus to student strengths²⁰.
- Identifying and acknowledging our own personal biases to maintain high expectations while using student assets to promote student agency²¹.

Conclusion

In a student-centered learning environment, students participate in guided learning opportunities where they make purposeful learning decisions that connect to their own experiences and understandings. This supports students in becoming active, independent learners while teachers serve

as facilitators throughout the process. Whether you are building student agency, scaffolding your learning environment, or considering how best to approach culturally responsive teaching in your classroom, emphasizing students’ roles in an authentic way is valuable to their overall success.

References

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- ⁵Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2018
- ⁶Flessner, 2014; Kuhlthau et al., 2015; Levy, 2008; Vaughn, 2020
- ⁷Mariage et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2021
- ⁸Belland, 2017; Colter & Ulatowsky, 2017; Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Mora, 2019; Nachtigall et al., 2022; NASEM, 2018
- ⁹Colliot & Jamet, 2019; Kellen & Antonenko, 2018; Mora, 2019
- ¹⁰Reiser, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2021
- ¹¹Phillips et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2018
- ¹²De Backer et al., 2016; Reeve & Shin, 2020; Reiser, 2004
- ¹³NASEM, 2018
- ¹⁴Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; NASEM, 2018
- ¹⁵Aronson & Laughter, 2016
- ¹⁶Gay, 2000, p. 29
- ¹⁷Byrd, 2016; Kelley et al., 2015; Tanase, 2022
- ¹⁸Byrd, 2016
- ¹⁹Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995
- ²⁰Flint & Jagers, 2021; Lopez, 2017
- ²¹Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hammond, 2015; Kieran & Anderson, 2019

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