Learner-Centredness:
An Issue of Institutional Policy
in the context of Distance Education

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ABSRACT

The new concept of learner-centredness has evolved as a contemporary counter to the traditional teacher-centred approach to education which has been authoritative in nature. There is now a shift in focus to the learner which in part has grown out of our dissatisfaction with traditional approaches that are based on the notion of giving/transmitting a predetermined body of knowledge to the learner who is treated as an object.

The shift reflects a desire to explore ways of making teaching responsive to learner needs & interests and allowing learners to play a fuller, more active and participatory role in the day-to-day teaching/learning processes. This inclination towards a more learner-centred approach to teaching/learning is not the outcome of a single structured school of thought. Educators and technical psychologists have focused on the learner and the learning processes from different perspectives. Learner-centred approach to teaching/learning can be said to be an outcome of an integration of overlapping and sometimes different perspectives on teaching/ learning.

Keywords: Learner-centred approach; Learner centred teaching, IGNOU, Distance Education, Learner-centredness, Leaner-centred pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

The new concept of learner-centredness has evolved as a contemporary counter to the traditional teacher-centred approach to education which has been authoritative in nature. There is now a shift in focus to the learner which in part has grown out of our dissatisfaction with traditional approaches that are based on the notion of giving/ transmitting a predetermined body of knowledge to the learner who is treated as object. The shift reflects a desire to explore ways of making teaching responsive to learner needs & interests and allowing learners to play a fuller, more active and participatory role in the day-to-day teaching/learning processes. This inclination towards a more learner-centred approach to teaching/learning is not the outcome of a single structured school of thought. Educators and technical psychologists have focused on the learner and the learning processes from different perspectives. Learner-centred approach to teaching/learning can be said to be an outcome of an integration of overlapping and sometimes different perspectives on teaching/learning.

The learning paradigm is different from the instructional paradigm in that the former is much more interactive and integrative; it focuses not only on what is learned but also on how knowledge is acquired. It also enables learners and teacher to recognise what knowledge learner brings to the learning process and keeps to empower learners within the learning process preparing them to be lifelong learners.

Learner-Centred learning is an active and dynamic process through which learners develop

deep understanding taking responsibilities of their own learning. This will be as stimulating as it is diverse in its accessibility and flexibility. It will help to provide learner with the best possible educational experiences in a flexible and stimulating environment. This will also enable him increasingly to have access to the resources that help him as individual learner, develop skills and self-awareness of his own learning processes, develop increasing independence in his learning and reach his highest potential in the subject studied.

The separation of learning from teaching in the discourse of educational psychology has fore-grounded the learner as 'personified learner' in educational institutions (McWillian, 1996). The learner-centred approach empowers the learner to take control of their learning as they take control of their destiny (Muller, 1998).

'LEARNER-CENTREDNESS' REDEFINED

Learner-centred approach redefines learning as individual "discovery". For the purpose of distance education, paradigm shift is viewed in terms of learners being seen evolving their own "truths" or "understanding" while reconciling the interaction taking place between practice and contribution from selected theoretical models (Walker & Daets, 2000).

Gibbs (1992) offers a useful definition of learner-centred learning. He states that learner-centred learning gives learners greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study. The learner-centred education is the perspective that couples a focus on individual learner's heredity, experiences, perspectives, background, talents, interests, capabilities and needs. It also focuses on the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and teaching process that are effective in promoting learner motivation of highest degree.

The humanistic movement in education has always impressed upon the personal and subjective feelings of learners and what learners as 'whole person' go through as they try to learn. Confidence building, creating an anxiety-free atmosphere for learning and emphasizing what learners know, rather than what they do not know, are the things that characterize humanistic teaching.This approach, therefore, emphasises learners' affective involvement in learning process. Another important trend in the learner-centred approach has been the stress on learning strategies. Learning strategies are used by the learners to develop different types of skills and reflect their attitudes and learning preferences. This is a very important area that actually took off from studies that tried to examine what strategies and tactics good learners use (Rubin, 1975). The stress on individualization emphasises the need for production of materials that are flexible and responsive to learner needs and pace. The tasks are also more open-ended in that learners should be able to make sense of materials according to their own capabilities. Learners, therefore, have to take more responsibility for their own learning through trial and error. This would mean less teacher mediation and interference and more self-directed learning leading to learner autonomy. However, there is a need for learners to be aware of gaps in their skills and knowledge, weaknesses and strengths and how they could be handled. This does not take away the overall responsibility of the teacher, nor minimize his role, in fact it requires a negotiation of power and a mutual agreement between the learner and the teacher about the goals, content and methodology adopted for learning.

Learner-centredness assumes that people learn and develop through experiences that involve the exercise of their autonomy, and develop their abilities to become autonomous learners through the very experiences of professing their autonomy. It gives learners a learning context where they can select an area of interest and then cater to the quantity and kind of resources for learning to their own particular learning needs and motivation of study. The learner-centred approach is not necessarily intended to replace existing methodologies but provide a framework for a variety of teaching methods geared to enhance learning.

LEANER-CENTRED PEDAGOGY

The pre-requisite of the learner-centredness is that the learner should be given opportunity to process information, solve problems and make decisions at his own. The knowledge in this process is not imparted to the learner but acquired by him through an open enquiry process. The project-based learning approach is an important step ahead towards learner-centred environment structured to encourage an in-depth exploration and understanding of learning tasks (Blumenfeld et al, 1991).

Tam (2000) characterizes the learner-centred pedagogy in open and distance learning by emphasizing that it is based on the needs of the learner rather than the needs of the teacher or the institution and gives to the learner flexibility and control over his learning and what, where, when and how to learn. It is compatible with the use of information and communication technology especially those which facilitate delivery of instruction and is based on efficiency, cost-effectiveness and equity. It moves a teacher from a source of knowledge to the status of a facilitator or managers of learning situations.

The curriculum, teaching methods and learning material at all levels and in all programmes of education should encourage independent & critical thought, capacity to question, enquire, reason, weigh evidence & form judgments, achieve understanding, recognise the provisional and incomplete nature of most human knowledge and communicate clearly. The focus is on what the learner experiences in learning rather than focusing on the factors that make good instruction. Burge and Howard (1988) lay down the principles for learner-centred learning like - learner has full responsibility, subject matter has relevance and meaning for him, involvement and participation are necessary for learning, relationship between the learner and the facilitator (teacher), learner sees himself different as a result of learning experiences, learner-experiences and cognitive-domains flow together etc.

CONSTRUCTIVISM: BASIS OF LEARNER-CENTREDNESS

The Learner-centredness draws heavily upon constructivism with the assumption that deep learning occurs when learner is actively engaged in the construction of knowledge for himself (Pulist, in press). Fardouly (1998) considering the characteristics of constructivist approach to teaching and learning, emphasises that learner is both an individual and a social process. He decides what he needs to learn by setting personal learning goals and constructs for himself meaningful knowledge as a result of his own activities and interaction with others (cognitive psychology). According to him learning strategies include library research, problem and case-based learning, doing assignments and projects, group works, discussions and fieldwork. Learning is a stimulus to the learner's real learning that mostly takes place outside learning situations and learner engages actively with the subject matter and transforms new information into a form that makes personal sense to him and connects with prior knowledge.

Constructivism focuses on the development of learner's understanding through exposure to the same materials for different purposes at different times which facilitates the knowledge transfer process (Jonassen et al, 1995). Unless new knowledge becomes integrated with the learner's prior knowledge and understanding, this new knowledge remains isolated and does not transfer readily to the new situations, hence, cannot be used effectively in new tasks. The teachers can assist learners in acquiring and integrating knowledge by a number of strategies that have proved to be effective with learners of varying abilities, such as concept mapping and thematic organisation or categorization.

The goal of learner-centred education would be to produce lifelong learners having problem-solving abilities that would understand and would be informed about their culture and society. In such a situation, the learners would be responsible for participating actively, positively and ethically within the learning and teaching environment. Faculty would be

responsible for providing supportive structure for learner-centred learning and will be active in providing clear statements of curricula, assignment and assessment requirements, providing materials to support learning and in providing effective and timely feedback on learner progress and performance. Different activities must be managed to benefit from increased learner control with reducing anxiety while managing self-regulation (Wagner, 1994). Learner must adapt to this control by practicing time management.

LEARNER-CENTREDNESS AS AN APPROACH TO TEACHING

Piccinin (1997) makes a mention of three approaches to learning: content-centred, teacher-centred and learner-centred. While the first two approaches put content to be taught and teacher's authority at the focus, learner-centred learning moves away from them and concentrates on learner motivation towards learning. The teaching involves getting to know the learners, founding out what they know, their misunderstandings and creating a context of learning which encourages learners to actively engage with the subject matter intervening with the objective of changing them. Learner needs more structure at the beginning of a course and will develop habit of independent learning later on. This type of learning involves more than mastering the content, designing sound learning experiences, knowing instructional techniques.

Learner-centredness as an approach to education aims at developing in each learner a sense of responsibility for his/her own learning and managing all related processes as early as possible. It means listening to what the needs of the learners are. The teacher as a facilitator may focus on providing guidance and support to learners who seek to meet specific learning goals in a learner-centred environment. Burge (1989) advocates different components of implementing learner-centred approach to learning e.g. learner's personal abilities, resources and opportunities for access to learning. The unfavorable factors may act as destructing or barriers in the process of learning. The learner must be given some choices concerning the course content and process without the course loosing academic rigor or coherence. This academic rigor must be specified in the course and learners should be helped in understanding as to how his choices contribute to effective learning. There should be relationships between theory and practice i.e. between the experiences of the learner and his peers, teacher and guest in the course. The cognitive and learning styles should mach to help holistic, visual and broad category learner. Individual diversity of the learner should be kept in view. We need to know different support mechanisms i.e. what type of library resources, counselling, administrative services and relationships are in place or are needed to ensure learner success and what are the constraints operating in between. The estimated levels of development reached by each learner have to be known. Their developmental dimensions may include ego, psychological, cognitive, physical and moral along with their theoretical and practical complexities.

In learner-centredness, learner's needs are kept at the centre of entire teaching/learning process. The learner is viewed as a complex interactor with past, present and future (Burge, 1989). Their varying educational backgrounds, work experiences, learning styles and present life situations all have much to contribute in the process of effective learning. Learner's life experiences should be related to all aspects of learning processes, course design, curriculum choices and instruction etc. Evaluation methods and support services should also take the diversity of the learner into account. The teaching/learning process should take the whole learner in the whole environment along with the past life experiences (Burge, 1988). The principles of developing learner's understanding of his own learning style and process come to the fore in the learner-centred approach. The learner needs to be able to select as to which text or content may be appropriate for his specific needs (Hoven, 1999).

CHANGING ROLE OF A TEACHER

In the past, highly structured material which used to be teacher-centred, was needed to cater to needs of the learners because they depended to a great extent on teacher direction. However, if they are capable to take the control of learning in their own hands, the focus should be shifted from teacher-centred to learner-centred and they should be helped in this endeavour by the teacher as a facilitator (Hoven, 1999). There is a need for change in teacher's conceptions and behaviour for the optimum benefit of the learners. This change in educational approach involves change in teachers as well as learners. They have to commit themselves to the learning process which is interactive, creative and learner-centred and be convinced of the importance of continuing professional growth (Riel, 1992).

In a constructivist learner-centred environment, the teacher can no longer assume the traditional role of knowledge transmitter, he has to act as a knowledge facilitator now. The teacher has to be sensitive towards the process of learning and be willing to provide encouragement and help whenever needed by the learner. This new environment also requires extra input and planning on the part of a teacher and he would be better served by thinking of teaching as designing learning environments. He has to carefully consider each and every process as to how he fits in that to help the learner in realizing his learning objectives.

While designing learning experiences emphasizing learner centredness, the faculty initiative will be expected to stimulate proactive, self-directed learning, make resource-based learning more flexible, enhance learner motivation, provide opportunities for learning founded on collaboration, group or social approaches, provide individual enrichment via resource and learning extension, capitalize on situated and work place learning opportunities, promote learning situations which support constructivist orientation to knowledge acquisition, stimulate self-awareness of learning processes and encourage meta-cognitive activities.

NEED OF AN INSTITUTIONAL POLICY ON LEARNER-CENTREDNESS

The learner-centred movement has encouraged the institutions to create challenging and novel environments that help the learners link new information to old, seek meaningful knowledge and think about their own thinking (Bonk and Reynolds, 1997). Stronger focus on the learner as an individual, a corresponding shift of focus from teaching to learners and learning, consideration of differences in learning styles and learning strategies; and various manifestations of humanism, have been the prominent and predominant factors affecting changes in institutional approach and methodology.

A learner-centred approach emphasises a shift in attention away from what is to be taught to include how and with whom it will be learnt. A learner-centred educational institution should try to balance research and learning in the pursuit of truth. The institution has to find answer to the following questions in order to go learner-centred:

- ➢ How do we help the learner to develop and select more self-reliant active learning strategies required for successful participation in a learner-centred institution?
- ➢ How will the institution recognise such a role?
- ➢ What is effective learning and how do we articulate and defend this conception to faculty and learners?
- ➢ What do we need to know about learners, their learning and performance to create, design and support effective learning experiences for them (Schmidt, 1996).

The adoption of such an approach to education will reaffirm the best of what the institution is doing now and also some changes to refocus on doing some other things better. This change will require time, money, goodwill and dedication. The institution will need to re-evaluate its approach to education and a clear and straight forward definition of learner-

centredness has to be adopted in order to avoid any misinterpretation at a later stage. It will reduce bureaucracy at different levels.

Learner-centredness should be a composite expression of an institution which would acquire shape in the form of a broad policy. The institution needs to establish 'culture of evidence' to guide and direct institutional policies and practices in support of improving teaching and learning environment. An understanding of the context of learning from the perspective of learners is necessary as to how they experience the institutional support and related activities. It is also imperative to have a better understanding of the connections among teaching, learning and education of the learner.It includes a thorough screening of cognitive styles, knowledge structures, instructional & curriculum design etc. To teach in a way that encourages and promotes learner motivation and brings change in perceptions, involves an understanding as to who learners are and how they learn.

A powerful institutional policy on learner-centred model would have integrated aspects of learner choice of time and place for study, content to be studied, assessment of the material, and acknowledgement of prior knowledge and skills. Compromises and variations in the emphasis between learner-centred and teacher-centred strategies incorporating negotiated and non-negotiable content with flexible delivery modes may be a way forward towards effective flexible learning (Sparrow et al, 2000). The institution has to adopt the following strategies, among others, in order to assimilate learner-centredness in all its pursuits:

> Ensure strong emphasis on reasoning, thinking and knowledge acquisition, communication and analysis skills for the learners that will provide a sound base for life long learning;
> Provide academic staff development and institutional change strategies to enhance those aspects of curriculum design, review, teaching and assessment that develop the qualities of lifelong learning in the learners;
> Ensure that assessment tasks are relevant both to learning goals and to ways of learning that encourage and reward learner-centred learning;
> Introduce learners to flexible learning and teaching methodologies;
> Facilitate and encourage institution-vide debate on the implications of learner-centred learning to consider its potential impact on the curriculum, structure and delivery of academic programmes;
> Obtain a clear picture of how academic programmes might develop in the coming years and how this information might be better used to address resource planning and development.
> Provide a more flexible learning environment in which learners take more control of their own learning and development in collaboration with staff and other learners (Piccinin, 1997).

USE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Technology can play an important role in learner-centred curriculum. However, it would require the learners to have achieved a certain level of technological literacy. Computer and Internet technology and its capacity for information access and retrieval can play a vital role in supporting the different aspects of learner-centred learning. Material could be deposited there to support both the learning and performance of the learners. The communicative dimension of the technology enables a learner to work together independent of place and time. The institution has to develop a teaching-learning policy that stresses on appropriate use of different technologies using 'learner-centred learning' as a unifying concept. It has to further provide a direction to explore the ways in which a range of approaches including the use of communication and information technologies can be optimally utilized in the process and at the same time sharing the experiences of staff and learners currently involved in learning and teaching which stimulate learner-centred process of learning and builds upon the body of pedagogic research underlining the teaching and learning process. The optimum use of technology in a learner-centred environment will be a boon for the institution. It is

this wardness of communication technology that enables the virtual institutions to launch their learner-centred programmes transcending the ephmerical barriers of time and space.

IMPLICATIONS

Moving towards learner-centred approach brings challenge not only for teachers but also for learners to become adaptive learners and focus attention on independent thinking. Learners require the basic competencies, understanding and tools embedded within the value system of the specific community of practice in order to solve problems. For enhancement of these specific abilities, the learners require training. There is also a need for the learners to be aware of the gaps in their skills and knowledge, weaknesses and strengths, and how they could be handled.

The institution should prepare the learner to be an adaptive learner and to focus attention on independent thinking and learning as an important educational goal. The learner should be situated in order to enable him acquire and understand important ideas for application to real life situations (Gardner, 1991). This way the institution should provide ample opportunities to the learners to think critically and creatively, to construct meaningful knowledge and to develop personal ownership and appreciation of the knowledge constructed (Brophy & Alleman, 1991). It is indispensable particularly when much of the responsibility of learning is shifted from the teacher to the learner. The learner becomes individually responsible to his own decisions and setting his learning objectives. He has to be aware of the fact that learner-centredness does not mean his domination of the programme, rather it requires intellectual accountability (Norman, 1996) and he must be adaptive to increased self-control and self-regulation, and practice time management extensively.

The body of knowledge with improving teaching and learning in higher education is both extensive and comprehensive. The major challenge for an institution to be learner-centred is to help faculty understand what learner-centredness means otherwise they may suspect it compromising disciplinary integrity through surrendering authority and power to the learner (Rimkus et al 2000). The academics who assess the quality of education of learners often define the concept from the perspective of teaching. A conceptual paradigm shift may have to take place in order to transfer full benefit of learner-centred approach to the learner. It is essentially a call for educational reform that attempts to correct a perceived shortcoming in some teaching practices and some academic programmes (Rooke, 1995). New methodologies and teaching learning strategies have to be devised. Learner evaluation and grading process would also have to show a commitment to learner-centredness and its identified elements which mean trying to stimulate growth and then measuring it.

CONCLUSION

There are two philosophical approaches that have shaped learner-centred learning - one is that ODL should provide the learner control over what, where, when and how they would like to learn the instructional material, other is that the framing of education must be in terms of learner-centred instead of teacher-centred (Tam, 2000). Thus, the concept of learner-centred learning has become popular and influential one in education at all levels. It is being seen as an important delivery character of distance education. However, the learning process has to be designed by the educational institutions keeping in view the requirements and the conveniences of the learners. The intermediate technologies used by the institution in imparting education help in overcoming the space and time limitations and design flexible education processes based on the learning needs. At present the open universities in India, are following a more structured approach to provide the services. Keeping the requirement of the programmes and competencies of the learners, diversified strategies may have to be used (Prasad, 1996) emphasizing the learner-centred approach.

The learner-centredness has to spring to the fore as we place open and distance learning within the emerging perspectives of the new millennium. This approach would be vehemently shaping the institutional policy of the education system in general and open and distance learning system in particular, in the coming years.

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