

Claudia J. Stanny

Director, Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

What is a learning-centered course?

A learning-centered course places the focus of attention on the quality of student learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). When designing a learning-centered course, instructors select readings, make decisions about how class time will be used, and design assignments, examinations, and other assessments based on the contribution these components make toward achieving the learning goals identified for the course. A learning-centered course differs from a traditional teaching-centered course in several ways (Weimer, 2002).

First, the **balance of control** in a learning-centered class will change. Individuals who are responsible for an outcome prefer to control the factors that contribute to the success of the outcome. In a teaching-centered environment, instructors feel responsible for learning (and feel vulnerable when some students fail to learn) in part because they believe that good learning depends entirely on good teaching. As a result, instructors of teaching-centered courses exert control over many aspects of the course. In contrast, a learning-centered instructor recognizes that students are ultimately responsible for their own learning. Students must engage in assigned learning activities and exert the effort required to learn. If we expect students to take responsibility for their own learning, we might need to give them more control over the way we structure learning experiences. An instructor creating a learning-centered course must balance the conflicting demands associated with each party's need for control. Instructors need to control aspects of the course to ensure that they meet their professional responsibility to create a course that addresses certain learning outcomes. Students need to control aspects of the learning environment to meet individual learning goals and maintain motivation. The location of the balancing point between competing claims of instructors and students for control in a specific course depends on the maturity and metacognition skills of the students. Students vary in

their ability to identify appropriate learning goals, regulate their learning strategies, and monitor their progress. The level of control exerted by instructors will be greater in beginning courses populated by students who have less developed metacognition skills.

Second, **how students learn content** is structured differently in a learning-centered course. Teaching-centered courses are content-heavy and encourage rote memorization, which produces memories for content that are seldom retained for the long term (Craik & Lockhart, 1972; Glenberg, Smith, & Green, 1977; Tulving, 1962). A learning-centered course will include activities that promote long-term learning, especially learning that involves higher-order thinking skills. For example, a learning-centered course will include activities in which students create integrated, organized representations of knowledge that students must access while applying disciplinary content to solve realistic problems.

Third, **teachers** in a learner-centered course take on the roles of coach and mentor instead of performing as a "sage on the stage." Instructors with a teaching-centered orientation are more likely to focus on course content and the transmission of information to students. Learning-centered instructors act as a "guide on the side." Both "sages on the stage" and "guides on the side" present content, but learning-centered instructors also design activities that allow students to practice disciplinary skills with the content, provide feedback to students about the quality of their performance, and suggest learning strategies that will help students improve their disciplinary skills and expand their knowledge base (King, 1993).

Fourth, **responsibility for learning** is placed squarely on the shoulders of students in a learning-centered course. Unfortunately, students at the beginning of a college program frequently operate at a level of cognitive development that Perry (1970/1999) characterizes as "dualistic learning." Dualistic learners believe that their instructors should be expert authorities who transmit knowledge to them by lecturing about content and identify the correct models and interpretations for students. One of the challenges associated with teaching in a learning-centered environment is the need to create course structures that

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establish the instructor's authority as an expert guide to the content and skills of the discipline while simultaneously holding students accountable for their own learning. As students advance in academic programs and become more sophisticated learners, they become more comfortable with a learning-centered environment in which students are expected to independently evaluate the quality and credibility of arguments in the discipline.

Finally, faculty and students in a learning-centered course use feedback based on the **assessment and evaluation of student work** for the important purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of learning activities toward reaching course learning outcomes. Students in a learning-centered environment use information from assessments to monitor their progress toward achieving their learning goals and calibrate their activities to improve their expertise. Instructors use information from assessment to evaluate whether assignments and activities in the course are effective in promoting the quality of learning intended. In a learning-centered environment, tests and other evaluations function as learning experiences as well as serving the traditional role of describing and ranking students in terms of expertise achieved (assigning grades).

A learning-centered course is *not* a *client-centered* course in the sense that "the customer is always right." Although student needs should inform and influence the design choices an instructor makes, design choices

should not be based on superficial "customer satisfaction" needs. Instead, the student-centered aspect of a learning-centered course means that instructors make design decisions based on information about the knowledge and skills students bring to the course with the goal of enabling students to benefit and learn from specific instructional activities. Being learning-centered means that instructors focus on what students ought to do during the course to learn and whether those learning activities actually promote the learning outcomes intended for the course. For example, if a course learning outcome identifies application of theory to problems or analysis and evaluation of evidence as goals, instructors should design class activities, assignments, and assessments that require students to apply theory to problems and analyze and evaluate evidence rather than merely recall and reproduce facts and other memorized content on an exam.

Comparing backward course design to teaching-centered course design

With a traditional **teaching-centered course design** process, instructors first select a text and other relevant readings. For example, a course might be organized around the chapters in a selected text book. Instructors decide how much time they will devote to different blocks of content, how they will sequence their lectures, and the number and timing of exams and other assignments. Instructors may identify intended learning outcomes after completing the course design (sometimes years after the initial course design, in response to a request from a Chair or Dean). Learning outcomes might consist of a list of topics the instructor "covers" in the class. Learning outcomes may be dominated by descriptions of content that students should retain, although some learning outcomes might identify higher-order thinking skills. In a teaching-centered approach, instructors might decide to use an examination or assignment to assign grades to students based on expectations about the number and type of examinations that should be given, constraints on grading time imposed by class size, and expectations about whether students should be required to write a paper. Examinations that emphasize the retention of content might not be aligned

Resource

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well with the more sophisticated learning outcomes identified and might not hold students accountable for developing these higher-order skills.

In contrast, the **backward design** process reverses the order of decisions and activities that teaching-centered instructors follow (Fink, 2003; Maki, 2010). Backward course design begins with articulation of the intended learning outcomes for a course. Guided by these learning goals, the instructor selects reading materials and designs assignments and in-class activities that promote acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and abilities described in the learning outcomes. Assignments and other assessments that instructors use to assign grades in the course should be aligned with the learning outcomes (Fink, 2003; Wulff, 2005). For example, an instructor might assign problem sets as

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homework to give students practice with these skills. A course with learning outcomes that describe written communication skills will include paper assignments that create opportunities to practice writing and editing work to improve use of language appropriate to the discipline. Introductory courses that emphasize acquisition of content might include a number of examinations that evaluate retention. If students are expected to evaluate evidence and apply models to solve a problem or interpret a real-life situation, instructors should create exam questions that require these thinking skills to select or construct a correct response.

Designing a learning-centered course

Dee Fink (2003, 2004) describes a multistage design process for creating integrated courses that promote significant learning.

- Identify critical components of the course: learning goals, teaching and learning activities, assessment procedures, and strategies for providing feedback to students. Instructors who begin design of a course by identifying learning outcomes are more likely to select other course components that align and integrate with learning outcomes, with no disconnects between components.
- Create the overall course structure and sequence of instructional strategies that promote the course learning outcomes.

- Finalize the details of course mechanics. Create a system for assigning grades and write the course syllabus.
- Identify and debug potential problems in managing the course. For example, will students have enough time to complete the background work for an assignment before the assignment is due? Will students have access to the resources needed to complete assignments? Are the required readings available on campus?

Include formal mechanisms for assessing the learning activities in the course. Good course design concludes with planning how the instructor will evaluate the effectiveness of assignments and instructional strategies. Not every assignment works perfectly the first time we implement it. Moreover, change over time is inevitable. Disciplinary changes may require changes in course learning outcomes. Changes in the skill sets of new cohorts of students present challenges and may require modified strategies for teaching and learning. Technology may render an existing teaching activity ineffective or irrelevant. New technology may present opportunities for creating new, more effective learning activities. In the absence of continuous self-reflection and evidence-based evaluation of course components, a well-designed course will become obsolete and ineffective.

If you are interested in designing or redesigning a course that is more learning-centered, you can access a free PDF copy of *A Self-Directed Guide to Designing Courses for Significant Learning* (Fink, 2004) at <http://www.deefinkandassociates.com/resources.html>.

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