

A mindset shift towards fostering students' actor-hood through increased student-centred settings within higher education

تحوّل النمط التفكيري نحو تعزيز الدور النشط للطلاب في بيئات التعليم المرتكزة حول الطالب في التعليم العالي

Boulebnane Abdelmoumen*
Fizya Bouchama-Sari Ahmed*

Received: 30/08/2023

Accepted: 20/09/2023

Published: 31/12/2023

Abstract:

In order to forge graduates endowed with the necessary skills and needed profiles in today's labour market, higher education institutions have gradually started to emphasize the adoption of student-centred learning (SCL). For learning to be truly student-centred, it demands an increased actor-hood from students which can be seen in the effective implementation of their agentic opportunities. Throughout the confusion revolving around the SCL concept, this paper suggests key tenets to be considered in order to maintain and promote students' actor-hood in higher education, which may raise awareness among educators and policy makers and ensures better enactment of student-centredness.

*Laboratory of Translation of Historical Documents, University of Algiers 2 - Abou EL Kacem Saâdallah, Algeria. abdelmoumen.boulebnane@univ-alger2.dz

[boulebnane@univ-alger2.dz](mailto:abdelmoumen.boulebnane@univ-alger2.dz)

*University of Algiers 2 - Abou EL Kacem Saâdallah, Algeria.

fizya.sariahmed@univ-alger2.dz

Keywords: Student-centred learning; Actor-hood; Agency; Mindshift; Higher education.

ملخص:

بهدف تكوين خريجي جامعات ذوي مهارات لازمة وملفات شخصية تلي احتياجات سوق العمل الحالي، بدأت المؤسسات التعليمية في الطور العالي تشجيع التدريس المرتكز حول الطالب. ومن أجل أن يكون التعليم حقًا كذلك، يتطلب على الطلاب تعزيز دورهم في المشاركة النشطة والفعالة في العملية التعليمية وذلك من خلال التنفيذ الفعال للفرص الممنوحة إليهم لهذا الغرض. في خضم الاتهام السائر حول مفهوم التعليم المرتكز حول الطالب، يقترح هذا العمل بعض المبادئ الرئيسية التي يجب مراعاتها من أجل الحفاظ على الدور النشط للطلاب وتعزيزه في التعليم العالي، هذه المفاهيم من شأنها ان تزيد من الوعي المتطلب لدى المعلمين وصانعي القرار في الجامعات وتضمن تنفيذًا أفضل لمبدأ تركز التعليم حول الطالب.

كلمات مفتاحية: التعليم المرتكز حول الطالب، الدور النشط للطالب، تحول النمط التفكيري، التعليم العالي.

Corresponding author: Boulebnane Abdelmoumen,
abdelmoumen.boulebnane@univ-alger2.dz

*** **

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary aims of higher education institutions worldwide are to shape independent and capable learners equipped with a myriad of skills that allow them to be valuable assets in today's labour market. Forging and training competent graduates who are ready and willing to make changes within

their society and workplace can be a reflective criterion for the success of a given educational system. Henceforth, higher education policies have been promoting the implementation of SCL as opposed to the traditional teacher-centred approach, given the drawbacks of the latter in putting up the desired student profiles (Hoidn, 2017).

Adopting a student-centred approach stipulates new roles for both teachers and students. These roles dictate a shift in the traditional learning dynamics that hold teachers as the expert knowledge holders who spoon-feed information to passive students. Instead, more focus and prominence are given to learners, who ought to take an active and central role in the educational process. Such change can occasionally be met with resistance from teachers, considering that their instructional practises are mainly influenced by their personal beliefs regarding learning and the approach they find themselves most comfortable with (Weimer, 2002).

Considering that SCL can be an ambiguous and challenging notion to implement, especially among teachers who have been relying on the traditional approach throughout their teaching experience (Hoidn, 2017); the required shift in educators' mindsets to optimally embrace student-centredness can be challenging to adopt. A central element of this shift is to prompt students to be actors, take responsibility, and assume agency, which demands significant efforts and reflective and critical competencies from teachers. Bearing in mind the rooted concepts, fostered by the pedagogical practices in higher education, which position the teacher as the ultimate authority figure and the sole expert in the discipline (Feden,2012), this

paper presents some key factors to consider by educators in their application to student-centredness. These elements may assist teachers in better understanding the rationale and importance of efficiently promoting student agency to nurture their actor-hood, and creating an efficacious student-centred environment that could meet the expected end goals.

2. Student-centred learning

The SCL approach is a learning perspective that entails a shift in paradigm from the unidirectional transmission of information from an expert teacher to passive students towards a process of actively constructing knowledge in which learners assume more responsibility and autonomy (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Kain, 2003).

Stemming from the constructivist theory, SCL grants students a central position and accentuates their role in the learning process (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). The approach further focuses on promoting deep learning and stresses students' responsibility and increased autonomy (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Moreover, it holds learners accountable and grants them some power to make decisions regarding their learning, and it deems them as teachers' collaborators in constructing knowledge in an environment of mutual respect (Gibbs, 1992).

3. Students' actor-hood and agency in the learning process

SCL in higher education (HE) “refers to enhanced actor-hood of students in teaching and learning processes and places emphasis on the acts of learning as opposed to the acts of teaching” (Klemenčič, 2020, p. 92). The concept of assuming actor-hood means that students possess agency over their

learning, and that they employ this agency to exert meaningful change and influence over their learning experience. The students' agency manifests when the learners are able to take prominent roles in the teaching-learning process, the active construction of knowledge, and taking a part in the design of their own learning environment. In other words, students are considered as agents of change when they develop a profound belief in their own ability to successfully comprehend challenging course materials, construct meaningful knowledge, and actively shape their learning experience and take efficient actions for that purpose (Kauai et al., 2021).

In order to be actors in the learning process, students should actively utilize their agency and the agentic opportunities that are made available to them in order to exert influence over the learning environment. For instance, students should offer their own input to the course and present alternative points of views when they deem appropriate. Moreover, when allowed the opportunity, they ought to make decisions about different aspects of their learning, such as the type of content they deal with, the time allotted for different tasks, suggesting different activities, adding their own contribution, etc. Therefore, it can be inferred that a certain degree of freedom and power in taking decisions related to the educational experience is required of students to be considered as actors of change (Weimer, 2002).

Student actor-hood presupposes that students are self-directed and can act independently of the directions of teachers. Furthermore, students are expected to be self-regulated and capable of developing their own learning objectives and strategies to realise them (Klemenčič, 2020). Student actor-hood

also presupposes a certain degree of freedom to act, and institutional opportunities to participate in decisions or acquire service roles in teaching and learning. Thus, educators and policy-makers in higher education institutions should be aware and work to develop students' actor-hood in their teaching environment.

Previous research has demonstrated the challenging nature of promoting student agency in institutions. Wong (2015) indicated that empowering students and granting them agency requires an ample amount of effort from both educators and learners, alongside the necessary endorsement and support of institutional policies. He also underscored the significance of recognizing the rights and responsibilities of students in sharing power with them. Zieser et al. (2018) emphasized the need for instructors to navigate various methods to nurture students' agency. Nevertheless, student actor-hood is not always greeted with a receptive disposition; according to Perumal (2008), educators may employ their authoritative position in response to the power dynamics and opposition exhibited by students. Furthermore, a learning environment characterized by the manifestation of student agency can induce a power-conflict in the classroom (Wong, 2015).

4. Unveiling the benefits of enhanced actor-hood

Students' actor-hood can be a key to an effective and beneficial learning process and serves as a catalyst for their development into promising graduates and desirable candidates for future workplace demands. A setting that supports students' actor-hood reflects a healthy and democratic learning

environment that promotes students' sense of identity and equips them with lifelong skills and competencies (Klemenčič, 2020).

Moreover, empirical evidence suggest that students' agency improves their motivation and induces positive impact on academic performance (Hoidn, 2017; Zieser et al., 2018). The reflective learning that students' actor-hood demands bring forth more focus and better engagement from the students who, as they become actively engaged, emerge in a deep learning experience. Additionally, it nurtures students' critical and analytical thinking skills since they are continuously put into positions that demand independent and informed analysis of complex situations or real-life decisions (Klemenčič, 2020). It has been found that it can equip students with the requisite knowledge, skills, and experiential opportunities to effectively advocate for their educational needs and aspirations. It further enhances and fortifies the learners' own self-beliefs and self-confidence, and empowers them to overcome the learning challenges (Kauai et al., 2021).

Being granted actor-hood challenges students and inspires them to become lifelong learners that are capable to act independently. Its benefits can also be seen in preparing students to take well-informed and effective decisions in real-life situations, making them reliable agents capable of instigating positive change and resolving problems. These factors may incentivise universities and teachers to foster it within the teaching process.

5. Supporting student agency

Empowering students and influencing them to be actors demand that teachers reflect on their beliefs and rethink their position in the teaching process. The following elements represent some of the key factors to be considered in order to build a student-centred environment that supports student's actor-hood:

5.1. Adopting a Constructivist ideology to teaching

Teachers' classroom practices are highly influenced by their beliefs regarding what is learning, how students learn, and what are the teachers' roles in the learning process. For instance, educators with traditional concepts about learning believe that they hold the responsibility of transmitting knowledge and leading the classroom, and would therefore neglect students' active engagement and process of constructing knowledge in a dominant display of teacher-centredness, which deprives students of assuming any agency.

According to Dewey (1902), drawing on students' previous knowledge is critical in the learning process. Teachers who assume the traditional approach fail to build upon students' background experience and knowledge. Moreover, traditional teaching methods, influenced by behaviourist theories, which rely on rote memorization and transmission of information often fail to yield promising learning outcomes, and grant students minimal control over their learning, tossing them to the side-line of the learning process instead of driving them to be actors therein (Rodríguez-Valls & Ponce, 2013).

The key to effective learning is to create a learning

environment governed by a complex, dynamic and active contribution from students in order to construct a proper understanding (Palmer, 2007). For teachers to accept the constructivist view means that they are becoming well aware of the importance of the prominent role that students must take in the classroom. Consequently, they ought to present learners with more opportunities to actually participate, negotiate and discuss knowledge.

Embracing the constructivist point of view entails on the one hand, providing students with learning opportunities in which they assume an active role and in which their cognitive and analytical abilities are respected; and on the other hand, it implies nourishing one's sense of responsibility, importance and role as a capable agent of potential positive change.

5.2. Unlocking students' potentials through power-sharing

Traditionally, quite often, all of the decisions regarding the classroom are made uniquely by teachers. Whether determining the content of their courses, methods of learning, used materials, or pace of the progress; students have minor influence in making decisions regarding their learning (Weimer, 2002; Hoidn, 2017). A key factor in driving students to become actors of change is empowering and granting them opportunities to participate in deciding, or at least, suggesting certain aspects regarding their learning. In fact, according to Palmer (2007), SCL encourages students to be positioned in a central role in which they can share their feelings, communicate their opinions, listen to each other, and voice their points of view. Likewise, students' actor-hood requires a balance of power between teachers and students as

well as a mutual sharing of responsibilities in the teaching and learning process, in addition to an enhanced autonomy among learners (Klemenčič, 2020).

Teachers are thereby beholden to give up, to some degree, the authoritarian regime in which they dictate and come up with all decisions about learning. Instead, creating a safe and welcoming environment in which students can share their opinions and suggest or select some of the aspects of their learning would equip them with agentic traits that are essential for them to engage in student-centred experiences.

Asking students about their opinions and eliciting their points of view about different matters related to learning can be intrinsically motivating for them to take other steps toward assuming more agency and acquiring a sense of ownership over their learning (Klemenčič, 2020). Many students can be reluctant to take an active role and try to bring their inputs into the course as a result of fear of potential negative reactions from their teachers, who may perceive such contributions as a challenge to their authority.

5.3. Equipping students with new skills

Assuming more responsibilities on the part of students and taking an active role can be an intimidating and challenging task, especially for those who were accustomed to the traditional passive role throughout their learning career. It can be confusing and overwhelming for students to be independent and take responsibility after experiencing being traditionally taught throughout the entire part of their learning path (Weimer, 2002). It is argued that most of the students lack the necessary skills to take an agentic role and act upon the given responsibility.

Therefore, it is important for students to experience a scaffolding learning process that equips them with new skills that can be useful and enable them to be actors in their learning process.

Having an agentic responsibility presumes a set of skills that allow students to take responsibility and bring forward tangible changes. For instance, a detachment from the continuous reliance on the teacher necessitates students to develop a good sense of self-efficacy, which stands for the learners' beliefs about their ability of achieving a given outcome (Bandura, 1986). Learners with high self-efficacy are prone for selecting more challenging tasks, putting more efforts in effectively achieving their goals, and further persevering when confronted with complex requirements (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1990). Another requisite for increased actor-hood is that learners should get acquainted with self-regulating learning strategies (Nabizadeh et al., 2019). Self-regulating learners are the ones who develop self-learning, content planning and organizing, self-evaluating, and reflective competencies (Zimmerman, 2008; Ashman & Conway, 2017). Both of these skills require the presence of certain cognitive capacities such as the ability to establish and work to achieve learning, to be able to efficiently monitor oneself, and to make informed judgments and both are deemed to support individual agency (Gaskill & Hoy, 2002). Along with other numerous skills that can set the foundation for optimally embracing actor-hood, educators are invited to develop those competencies instead of solely focusing on covering the syllabus content. By doing so, students can enact a more effective and strategic implementation of their agency to achieve their learning goals (Klemenčič, 2020).

5.4. Addressing students' emotional factors

Even if learners are presented with agentic opportunities, it is not a certainty for actor hood to be embraced among students (Klemenčič, 2020). For that to happen, students should have the will to exert agency; that may be manifested in them making a conscious decision to engage in the learning process and shaping and influencing their learning environment.

The reluctance to bring about such a change and the lack of motivation to assume agency can be due to many factors, most of which can be attributed to emotional-affective elements (Weimer, 2002). The lack of confidence to take over their learning, for instance, negatively affect students' beliefs in their own abilities, making them prefer the passive role. Moreover, the long-standing traditions that put the teacher as authoritarian and sole source of information may demotivate students from negotiating meanings or suggesting change. Additionally, the excessive focus on summative evaluations and exam grades can cultivate a risk-averse mindset, discouraging learners from pursuing their own interests and paths in studying.

Teachers are thus invited to consider the emotional side of their learners by implementing a set of measures that encourage them to take more prominent role. Stimulating students' intrinsic motivation through adapting their courses to the personal interest of their students can be a good starting point. Also, overtly inviting and encouraging students to share their opinions, provide their suggestions, and make contribution to the learning environments can motivate learners to be more actively engaged. It is important that students would not feel threatened if they present alternative takes than that of teachers.

5.5. Policy makers

In order to encourage and foster students' agency, a supportive and empowering learning environment is essential. Educational institutions that do not support and prioritize autonomy or provide the necessary guidance and tools to be active and independent would likely to produce students that are reluctant to take initiatives and be in charge of their learning.

This highlights the importance of dropping the dogmatic mindset among policy makers in higher institutions, which staunchly opposes any form of change and undervalues the contributions of students in terms of suggestions. A more welcoming, democratic and open to change approach from higher education's institutions would allow and encourage students to take the lead and actively work as a peer in bringing forth positive change to the educational process.

Students should also be provided with actual opportunities to enact their agency through concert discussion and suggestions that involve them into the design of their learning environment. This may be done through surveys, discussions, or suggestion papers which should be taken into consideration in contributing to the curriculum planning. Policy makers in higher education institutes should alter their vision towards university learners as active agents capable of making valuable contributions to the curriculum and other institutional decisions (Klemenčič, 2020).

6. Conclusion

For higher education's institutions to apply the reforms that support the implementation of SCL, it is crucial to pay attention to enhancing actor-hood among students. For that, it is crucial to

promote students' agency, which refers to their capacity to influence and shape their learning environment to meet their goals. Taking into regards the contemporary consensus that holds higher education accountable for making a contribution in maintaining and fostering democratic and empowering environment that seeks to form well-equipped graduates, several key points were highlighted to promote student's agency within higher educational institutions.

In order to promote students' agency and effectively implement student-centredness, teachers need to transition from the conventional behaviourist-influenced approach to a constructivist deep-learning based approach, which would allow students to actively engage in their learning. Teachers are also invited to subside some of the influence over the power scales in decisions making, thereby creating an environment that fosters student participation by inviting them to share their opinions, provide their suggestions, and make contributions. In addition, it is imperative for educators to put emphasise on equipping their students with essential skills such as self-regulated learning and self-efficacy while taking into consideration their emotional side and thus providing them with a welcoming learning environment in which they can share their input and make contributions. All of these factors should be undergone under a lenient and accepting higher education policy framework that welcomes and values the input of students.

Future research might encompass an exploratory examination of students' perceptions regarding the adoption of actor-hood in their learning, with the aim of elucidating the underlying factors that may facilitate the process of its adoption.

Further investigation may also explore the cultural dimension of the different contexts and its influence on the power dynamics inherent in the students' actor-hood.

*** **

7. Bibliography:

- Ashman, A. F., & Conway, R. (2017). Cognitive Strategies for special education. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315271460>

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Upper Saddle River, NJ:Prentice Hall.

- Barr, R. B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From Teaching to Learning - A New Paradigm For Undergraduate Education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 27(6), 12–26.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1995.10544672>

- Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Feden, P. D. (2012). Teaching without Telling: Contemporary Pedagogical Theory Put into Practice. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 23(2), 5–23.

[https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ972561;](https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ972561)

- Gaskill, P. J., & Hoy, A. W. (2002). Self-Efficacy and Self-Regulated learning. In *Elsevier eBooks* (pp. 185–208).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-012064455-1/50012-9>

- Hoidn, S. (2017). Student-centered learning environments in higher education classrooms. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

• Hoidn, S., &Klemenčič, M. (2020). The Routledge International Handbook of Student-Centered Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Routledge.

• Kain, D. (2003). Teacher-Centered versus Student-Centered: Balancing Constraint and Theory in the Composition Classroom. *Pedagogy*, 3(1), 104–108.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/15314200-3-1-104>

• Kau, T. M., Victor, G., Kyota, C., &Waiki, Q. (2021). Developing Student Agency to Support Student Application and Implementation of Design Thinking: Phase One. *Techne serien - Forskningislöjdpedagogikochslöjdvvetenskap*, 28(2), 119–127.

• Klemenčič, M. (2020). Students as Actors and Agents in Student-Centred Higher Education. In S. Hoidn& M. Klemenčič (eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Student-Centered Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (pp. 92–108). Routledge

• Lee, E., &Hannafin, M. J. (2016). A design framework for enhancing engagement in student-centered learning: own it, learn it, and share it. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 64(4), 707–734. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-015-9422-5>

• Nabizadeh, S., Hajian, S., Sheikhan, Z., &Rafiei, F. (2019). Prediction of academic achievement based on learning strategies and outcome expectations among medical students. *BMC Medical Education*, 19(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-019-1527-9>

• O’Neill, G., McMahan, T. (2005). Student-centred learning: What does it mean for students and lecturers. In G. O’Neil, S. Moore, & B. McMullin (Eds.), *Emerging Issues in the Practice of University Learning and Teaching* (pp. 27-36). AISH; AISHE: Dublin, Ireland, 2005.

• Palmer, P. J., (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA.:Jossey-Bass

• Perumal, J. (2008). Student resistance and teacher authority: the demands and dynamics of collaborative learning. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40(3), 381–398.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270701724570>

• Rodríguez-Valls, F., & Ponce, G. A. (2013). Classroom, the WE Space: Developing Student-Centered Practices for Second Language Learner (SLL) students. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 21, 55.

<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v21n55.2013>

• Schunk, D. H. (1990). Goal setting and Self-Efficacy during Self-Regulated learning. *Educational Psychologist*, 25(1), 71–86.

https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep2501_6

• Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-Centred Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

• Wong, M. Y. (2015). A Qualitative Examination of Teacher-Student Power-Sharing in Chinese Classrooms: A study in Hong Kong. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 10(2), 251–273.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03397065>

• Zeiser, K., Scholz, C., & Circks, V. (2018). *Maximizing Student Agency: Implementing and Measuring Student-Centered Learning Practices*. American Institutes for Research.

• Zimmerman, B. J. (2008). Investigating Self-Regulation and Motivation: historical background, methodological developments, and future prospects. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45(1), 166–183.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831207312909>