What Is A Learner Centered Approach?

In a nutshell, a learner centered approach is one where the complete eLearning experience is focused on the learners. For example, the courses need to be very user-friendly, so that learners can navigate the course without any difficulty. They should be able to easily access the content of their choice, and skip the sections they are not interested in. Likewise, learners should find the courses relevant to their challenges and learning needs. The courses should include real life examples that learners can relate to.

“A learner-centered approach starts from the belief that the learner is at the centre of the learning process and not the syllabus and as such they are self-directed equals in the learning process along with tutors, organizers and funders. It is holistic in that it attends to the whole person and values their life’s experiences as valuable prior learning.”

As a result of this definition, it is noticeable that:

- The learning atmosphere is welcoming, encouraging, engaging and supportive. The learning is about meeting needs and interests, it is flexible and responsive and based on an assumption that the learners knows best
- There is a real partnership between tutor and learners in designing and delivering the courses
- The tutor, the organizers and funders are open, caring and engage learners. The learners are listened to, have an input into content and process and exercise choice
- A learner-centered approach starts where the learners are at, supports them to negotiate content and makes use of self-evaluation.

What the tutor needs to pay attention to in a learner-centered approach

In adopting a learner-centered approach, a tutor needs to be aware that this is not just about paying attention to the individual learner. The tutor must pay attention to the individual learner, the group and the task or content of the course or session as detailed below:

Individual
In addition to attending to the class/group, the tutor must focus on the learner so that they are appreciated as a learner on a journey and that their learning can be supported. Having insight into individuals’ needs, roles and learning styles can support a tutor in attending to the individual learner.

Group/class (process)

- In order to ensure that the learning is effective the tutor must consider how the class is functioning as a collective. In other educational settings this could mean that the tutor needs to ensure control and proper behaviour. In a community education setting, this involves promoting inclusion, participation and facilitating the class/group to shape the learning.
- Having an insight into groups and how they behave and develop is a huge support to the tutor in attending to the class/group.
- The tutor’s main function is to ensure that the task is performed. For community education it is to ensure that the agreed learning is carried out. This means covering the programme or curriculum, the origins of this can be decided by an outside organization or institution like the VEC but it may also be decided by the community education center or by the learners themselves.
- Knowing the subject and course is essential for the tutor in attending to the task.

The next part of this handbook goes into more depth on the functions as named above.

**Individual learning process**

In paying attention to the learner the tutor can make use of the following:

**Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (see at end of this section)**

- In community education the lower stages are quite significant with needs like:
  - Safety
  - Food and shelter (in specific cases)
  - Self-esteem
  - This method of understanding learners’ needs can support the tutor to think about the different needs that individuals have in the class in order to support their learning.
Teaching and learning styles

The tutor might find it helpful to consider the following broad concepts regarding how people learn.

- Behaviourist

In this method of teaching learning is achieved by doing (behaviour). The tutor carried out an action which in turn provokes a reaction in the learner – normally this is not explained. Negative aspects of this concept are that the tutor can use his/her authority to get the learners to do something that they may not be happy with. However, this can also be seen in a more positive light in that a tutor can take an affirming, encouraging or even a learner-centered approach (without explaining this to the learners) which should provoke positive learning behaviours in the learners (affirming actions in learners, learners feeling affirmed and recognized).

- Cognitive

In this concept, learning is achieved through understanding at a conscious level i.e. by way of comprehension and sense making. The tutor explains the topic of the class/course and outlines how this will be happen in the class. This will support conscious learning for learners.

- Constructivism

Learning occurs by creating realities and meaning as a form of co-creation of knowledge. It is based on the understanding that there is no ‘objective’ reality but that reality is created between people. In practice the tutor and the learner create understanding and meaning together. This concept is possibly the most important for tutors taking a learning-centered approach in that it shares the responsibility of creating and delivering learning.

The tutor may also pay attention to the learning styles of learners – it is useful if the tutor not only thinks about the learning styles but that she/he openly names this as an issue for learners. The following are the main learning styles, learn about the participants and use a mix to suit all:

- Visual
  - Learning is achieved through seeing. The tutor’s use of maps, diagrams, charts etc. is recommended. You can use IT to be creative such as Pecha Kucha, which is a presentation of a concept/idea in 20 slides for 20 seconds.
  - Aural / auditory
- Learning is achieved through listening. The use of presentations, discussions and debates by the tutor is recommended.
- Read / write
  - The learner learns through writing and words in a written form. The use of readings by the tutor is recommended.
- Kinesthetic
  - The learner learns through experience and practice. The use of examples from real life, role-plays and applying learning in real life situations is recommended. This is often the preferred style of adult learners.

7 Advantages Of A Learner Centered Approach In eLearning

1. **Improves participation.**
   The first step towards the success of any eLearning program is participation. A learner centered approach addresses all the essential needs of learners, ensuring learners get a personalized and convenient eLearning experience. For example, if a certain learner group prefers games and exercises, the courses should be made more interactive. Similarly, if learners are more likely to access the course content on tablets or mobiles, the courses should be designed to support this need. Due to the minute attention paid to learner’s needs, learner centered courses ensure greater participation in eLearning.

2. **Improves retention of knowledge.**
   Given that a learner centered approach places high emphasis on relevance and engagement, it greatly influences learners’ interest levels. The learner centered approach shifts the focus from traditional eLearning, which emphasized only on graphs and PowerPoint slides, to eLearning with more engaging and simulating content. For example, if you are developing a course for engineers, the course should have real life scenarios that are relevant to their day-to-day problems. Also, the course will have certain elements, which will make them use the knowledge they may have acquired previously. This way, learners will retain the knowledge better as opposed to a plain eLearning course with a lot of theoretical knowledge.

3. **Boosts performance at work.**
   A typical learner centered eLearning course will have a lot of scenarios, case studies, role plays, etc. For example, if an organization is training its employees on quality guidelines or industry best practices, a learner centered course with a lot of engaging and interactive content will help learners grasp the content more effectively. This way, learners are more
likely to apply their learning at work, leading to improved on-the-job performance.

4. **Develops problem-solving skills.**
   A learner centered eLearning course has a lot of real life examples, including games, quizzes, and challenges. For example, the course may have challenges and games involving real life problems, which will force learners to think of solutions. This kind of training develops problem-solving skills, which is useful when learners encounter similar problems at work.

5. **Fosters collaborative learning.**
   Learner centered courses provide the opportunity to foster collaborative learning. You should design eLearning courses in such a way that learners have to involve their peers/superiors in completing the course. Alternatively, the courses should have certain group exercises, which makes learners come together to solve problems, and thereby share learning. This approach not only encourages collaboration but also fosters teamwork.

6. **Makes learning more fun.**
   Use of games and stories in eLearning makes learning more fun. A learner centered approach provides a lot of choices to learners. For example, if a particular course involves research, learners should be given choices of topics for research. Likewise, learner centered eLearning courses use lots of different mediums, such as videos, podcasts, practical assignments, etc. With these elements, learning is no longer perceived as boring and monotonous.

7. **Facilitates personalized learning.**
   All learners do not have the same learning needs. Some may just like to understand the basics of a concept, while some may like to understand a course in detail. Also, some learners may already have some knowledge about a topic, whereas some of them will be entirely new to the concept. A traditional eLearning course will treat all learners the same way, and may not respond to the needs of different types of learners. Things are different with learner centered eLearning courses. In such courses, developers may include supplementary material with messages like “Click here to know more” or “Here’s a refresher course”. The additional material makes learning more effective.

To conclude, as opposed to other approaches, such as a content centered eLearning or a teacher centered eLearning, a learner centered approach provides many more benefits.

**Learner-Centered Teaching Strategies:**

**Becoming a Lifelong Learner**
A paradigm shift is occurring in education: The shift from the teacher being the “center of the classroom” to a primary focus on whether or not the student is learning. One article refers to the teacher’s role as changing from being the “sage on the stage, to the guide on the side.” (King, 1993) In learner-centered teaching, the responsibilities of both the teacher and the learner change, with the ultimate goal of the student becoming a “lifelong learner.” Note: This paradigm shift will require change for both the students (who are used to being told everything) and the teachers (who are used to telling students what they need to know).

Learner-centered teaching focuses attention squarely on learning: what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is applying the learning, and how current learning positions the student for future learning.

- When teaching is learner-centered, the action focuses on what the students (not the teachers) are doing….This learner-centered orientation accepts, cultivates, and builds on the ultimate responsibility that students have for their own learning.
- When teaching is learner-centered, content is used, not covered.
- Course content / curriculum is not the end; it is the means to the end.
- Don’t assume that because teachers have taught, that students have learned.
- This is not only about how teachers need to become learner-centered teachers, but also teaching the students to become learner-centered learners.

The paradigm shift to learner-centered teaching can be summed up with the following seven principles, as discussed in Learner-Centered Teaching by Maryellen Weimer:

**Principle 1: Teachers Do Learning Tasks Less**

Learners do more of:
- Organizing the content
- Generating the examples
- Asking the questions
- Answering the questions

Teachers do less of:
- Summarizing the discussion
- Solving problems
- Constructing diagrams

**Principle 2: Teachers Do Less Telling; Students Do More Discovering**
This is “messier,” in that classrooms may be “louder,” it may take longer for students to “get” concepts, and the teacher learns new teaching methods. Students progressively take more responsibility for their learning through discovering, and “uncovering” what they need to know.

**Principle 3: Teachers Do More Design Work (of activities and learning experiences)**

Effective assignments and activities, which are designed to help students:

- Increase learning skills (learning “how to” learn)
- Motivate student involvement and participation
- Discover work that is related to the discipline/real world
- Develop content knowledge, learning skills, and awareness

**Principle 4: Do More Modeling**

Demonstrate for students how an expert approaches a learning task, and how you problem solve.

**Principle 5: Do More to Get Students Learning from and with Each Other**

Use collaborative activities and cooperative groups for learning.

**Principle 6: Work to Create Climates for Learning**

Create learning environments conducive to students taking responsibility for their own learning.

**Principle 7: Do More with Feedback**

Feedback is not just about grades, but also informal and helps students learn from mistakes.

**Using Active Learning Strategies in Learner-Centered Teaching**

So, if lecture is not the primary instructional method, what is? Learner-centered teaching utilizes “active learning strategies,” often referred to as “experiential learning.” Learners are regularly presented with tasks, whether it be problems to solve, opportunities to discuss, hands-on projects, simulations, etc. **IMPORTANT: Don’t do an activity “just to do” an activity.** It should be connected in some way to the learning that you want to occur, whether it’s specific to the Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) or critical thinking skills. Always tie it back to the learning.
Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning provides one of the foundations for this model of how learning occurs in the classroom. **Note that it is an ongoing cycle of learning (not only for the student, but also for the teacher!):**

![Kolb's Model of Experiential Learning](image)

*Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984)*

This model of learning follows these steps:

1. **Action / Activity**- The learner performs some type of activity related to the lesson or subject.
2. **Reflection**- The learner reflects about what they did and what happened as a result of their activity. This can be in one of several forms: free writing, journaling, or small or large group discussions.
3. **Knowledge/theory**- The learner uses the results of the reflection to develop knowledge and theories, which helps further the learning process because the learner is conceptualizing their own theories, not just accepting the theory of the instructor.
4. **Planning**- Based on the learner’s theories, they plan what to do next and anticipate the results of further activity. This process moves the learner into the higher levels of thinking than merely recall/recite facts or information.

**Critical Thinking Takes Students Deeper in Their Learning**

Employers are looking for graduates who can problem-solve, know how to work in teams, are flexible, have strong interpersonal skills, and who can use “higher level thinking.”

We want students to move from “surface-level” learning to “deep learning,” which is a facet of being a lifelong learner. Learner-centered teaching focuses on developing critical thinking skills, by intentionally challenging the students to do more than just recall facts and figures. When was the last time your boss asked you to complete a multiple-choice task?
The most common framework used to explain deeper levels of critical thinking is the one developed by Benjamin Bloom, in 1956. *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* described and explored six levels of critical thinking in the cognitive domain. In 2001, this taxonomy was revised by Anderson and Krathwohl, incorporating new knowledge. Essentially, the six levels of critical thinking include:

**Remembering:**
*Retrieving, recognizing, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory.*

**Understanding:**
*Constructing meaning from oral, written, and graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing, and explaining.*

**Applying:**
*Carrying out or using a procedure through executing, or implementing.*

**Analyzing:**
*Breaking material into constituent parts, determining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose through differentiating, organizing, and attributing.*

**Evaluating:** *Making judgments based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.*

**Creating:** *Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing.*

Within learner-centered teaching, a major emphasis should be to help students progress in their critical thinking skills. In Appendix A, a chart is provided that further describes each level of critical thinking, along with verbs that can be used in assignments, projects, and discussions, along with potential student “products” that will require the use of the various levels of critical thinking.

The Importance of Reflection in Learning
In Kolb’s model above, reflection is one of the crucial steps of learning. Without reflection, learning doesn’t occur. Again, this is not about how to “memorize and recall” information. It’s about connecting, integrating, and synthesizing experiences, information, thoughts, and feelings with real-life application. Reflection is the bridge between what “happens” and how it gets applied in life. In helping students develop critical thinking skills, reflection is essential. The question then becomes “How?” The answer is: “In a number of ways.”

You will have some students in your classroom who will need to reflect internally. Often categorized as “introverts,” these learners need to process their information through thinking, journaling, and by themselves. In other words, introverts “think to speak.” Contrast this with the extroverts, who struggle to process information unless they are doing it externally, and with other people. They often think as they talk (and sometimes talk before they think…), whereas introverts will typically think about an answer for a while before they speak (if they share at all). In other words, they “speak to think.”

You will be able to quickly observe who is who in your class, based on who is typically answering questions versus who does not typically initiate an answer. And you yourself probably fit into one of the two categories. Neither is the “best” way, but combined, this poses a challenge for a teacher: How to engage both introverts and extroverts in your class in the practice of reflecting on their learning?

Tips for engaging introverts and extroverts in discussion and reflection:

- Know your own preference!
- Address this issue with your students. Ask them to identify where they would categorize themselves.
- Ask the students to identify how they best can be engaged (provide a way for introverts to write their answers down!).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introverts</th>
<th>Extroverts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide discussion / reflection questions ahead of time</td>
<td>It’s okay to allow extroverts to “process” or think out loud; encourage them to do this quietly in pairs or threes to give introverts space to think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow time for them to think, reflect before they answer</td>
<td>May need to coach extroverts to not share as quickly, to let others have time to process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When facilitating class or group discussion, make sure you “check in” with introverts to get their input before the discussion moves on</td>
<td>Give opportunity for them to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Provide “reflection breaks” “think out loud” on paper before verbalizing it

We have provided a list of discussion / debriefing / reflection activities in this packet. Note especially those activities listed in the “Journaling” and “Reflection / Debriefing” sections of the index.

Note: Reflection is a discipline that is good for faculty as well as students. Do you practice reflection on your teaching and on your own learning?
Asking Better Questions Improves Learning
Often the biggest challenge is to know how to ask better questions. It’s easy to get caught in using “Yes / No” and “closed-ended” questions. And students are used to getting these! Unfortunately, they usually don’t yield quality discussions or reveal if learning has actually occurred.
An open-ended question is designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the subject's own knowledge and/or feelings. It is the opposite of a closed-ended question, which encourages a short or single-word answer. Open-ended questions also tend to be more objective and less leading than closed-ended questions. **Keep in mind that you may want to have discussion questions in pairs or small groups (4-5), to get more students involved in the discussion. Pairs or groups can then “report out” to the rest of the class.**

Open-ended questions typically begin with (or imply) words such as "Why" and "How", or phrases such as "Tell me about..." Often they are not technically a question, but a statement which implicitly asks for a response. Examples:

**Closed-ended Questions**

- How many kids are in your family?
- Do you hope to get a job after your graduate?
- Did you get the answer right?

**Open-ended Questions**

- Tell me about your family.
- Describe the kind of job you would like.
- How did you get to that answer?

In **Appendix A**, you’ll find a list of verbs that correspond to the levels of critical thinking. These can be used to craft open-ended discussion, reflection, and assessment questions. An example of how to use these critical thinking verbs is in the following list of **generic question stems**. **Keep this list handy!** Generic question stems serve a variety of purposes. That can be provided to students as an aid in developing review or discussion questions, or they can be used to generate questions as part of an activity or for student reflection. *(Adapted from King, 1995 and Endres, 2003)*

**Generic Question Stems**

<p>| Compare … and … with regard to… | What do we already know about…? |
| Describe … in your own words.    |                                           |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you agree or disagree with this statement…? What evidence is there to support your answer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain how…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain why....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are … and … similar?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How could … be used to …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does … affect…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does … apply to everyday life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does … tie in with what we learned before?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does… apply to everyday life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarize … in your own words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the implications of…?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the strengths and weaknesses of …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think causes …? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does … mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is … analogous to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is a counter-argument for …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is a new example of …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is another way to look at …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the best … and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the counter argument for…?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the difference between … and …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the meaning of…?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the nature of …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the solution to the problem of …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is…analogous to?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would happen if …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is … happening?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is … important?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Suggestions for Using Learning Activities
Keep in mind that doing activities “just to do activities” will not aid the learning process. Different activities are useful for different purposes in teaching, but some activities can be used for more than one purpose. More complex activities and or combinations of activities will take longer than the minimum suggested time. Keep in mind that the activities can be modified, combined with other activities, and/or tailored to meet your specific goals. Make sure that the activity has a purpose directly tied to the content being taught. As you plan, here are some things to keep in mind:

1. **First, determine what concept(s) you are trying to teach.** (What do you want them to learn?)
2. **Second, determine how you will know if the concept has been learned?**
3. **Then, determine which activity (or activities) will best help teach that concept.**  
   
   (Adapted from Wiggins and McTighe, 2005)

Characteristics of good activities should:
- Relate to one or more learning outcomes or critical thinking skills.  
  **(PURPOSE)**
- Be appropriate for the learning outcomes. (For example, it is very difficult for a student to practice problem solving on a multiple-choice test.)
- Motivate and engage students.
- Integrate assessment and feedback.  
  **(ALWAYS REFLECT)**
- Facilitate transfer to real world applications.
- Require students to make decisions based on facts, information, logic, and/or reasoning (Duch, 2001)
- May require students to determine what information is needed and/or what steps or procedures need to be taken (Duch, 2001)
- May be given in stages with additional information in the second or later stages (Duch, 2001)
- Be complex enough to engage whole group directly. (Duch, 2001)
- Include the appropriate informational resources to support the learner such as lecture, textbook, research materials, and so on.

Depending on the use of a specific activity, it may not meet all of these characteristics. For example, an activity used to assess prior student
knowledge may not meet the criteria of practice with learning content and transfer to real world application. The same may be true of a content activity used in place of a lecture as a way for students to generate the learning content.

Finally:
A. Be creative.
B. Be flexible.
C. Do your own “reflection” after the activity to assess for its effectiveness, what you would change, how you might use it again in the future.