



# L E A R N I N G

## a B S T R A C T S

### THE LEARNING COLLEGE: BOTH LEARNER AND LEARNING CENTERED

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As the Learning Revolution spreads rapidly throughout education, a new language on learning is beginning to appear. Every new book, conference program, and Web site is peppered with learning terms: learning college, learning communities, learning organizations, learning outcomes, brain-compatible learning, surface learning, deep learning, and learning facilitators.

The term "learning college" is beginning to be used to designate a new direction in education and provides an umbrella to shelter many of the concepts in current use. Two key concepts are "learner centered" and "learning centered." These terms are often used interchangeably, but they do not mean the same thing. While different, however, both concepts are deeply embedded in the history of education and are equally valuable in providing a foundation for the Learning College.

#### **Learner Centered**

Seasoned educators can easily remember the Humanistic Education Movement nourished by humanistic and phenomenological psychologists and one of the movement's key leaders, Carl Rogers, who gave us "client-centered therapy." Institutes in dozens of universities in the 1960s, with funds from the National Defense Education Act, trained school and college counselors in client-centered approaches to counseling, and "client centered" set the tone in many schools for the interactions between counselors and students and sometimes between teaching faculty and students.

The Student Development Movement, launched at the beginning of the 1970s, urged colleges and universities to become more "student centered." Student development champions, in their many statements, would not settle for counselors and student personnel professionals alone to become student centered; they wanted everyone in the institution to do so, and they achieved modest success in their goals.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the purveyors of Total Quality Management asked educators to become more

"customer centered," another variation on the theme. For the most part, educators have rejected the terminology of customer centered because it smacks too much of the business world and implies that the customer is always right, a sentiment few educators hold.

Client centered, student centered, customer centered, and learner centered all mean essentially the same thing—institutions and their employees attempt to focus on the special needs of the individuals they exist to serve through their policies, programs, and practices. Learner centered is but the most recent manifestation of the impulse to respond to individual needs, and it carries the added value of suggesting via the word "learner" the reason for the relationship between the institution and the client, or student, or customer it serves.

#### **Learning Centered**

Schools and colleges are by definition centers of learning, and faculty often bridle with appropriate righteous indignation if anyone suggests they are not learning centered. In the last forty years the impulse to place learning more firmly at the center of the educational enterprise has had a number of manifestations. Learning contracts were widely used during the Progressive Education Movement to stipulate for both student and teacher the specific goals and grades the student would achieve. Learning contracts carried the added value of making it clear that it was the student's responsibility to live up to the contract he/she had signed, an old value and practice regaining popularity in the Learning Revolution.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, spurred by the work of Bloom, Postlethwaite, Mager, and others, behavioral objectives became the common currency for learning-centered education. In this period there were major attempts to codify what learning meant by creating banks of specific objectives for courses and programs. Faculty could access these banks of objectives and select those most pertinent to their goals, their teaching styles, and the levels of competency of their students. Some community college leaders were so attracted to the promise of

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behavioral objectives they even attempted “management by objectives,” and for a while in the 1960s MBO was as popular as TQM has been in more recent years.

The attempt to focus on learning-centered practices emerged again in the 1970s and 1980s under the banner of competency-based education. Community colleges created entrance and exit competencies, especially for selected vocational programs. In some cases students were allowed to enter these programs on demand and exit when they had mastered the required competencies, a practice heralding one of the key goals of the current Learning Revolution. Today, some community colleges, such as the Community College of Denver and Johnson County Community College, have developed exit competencies for every course and program in the catalog.

A flurry of interest in assessment, championed by the American Association for Higher Education, reaching its apogee at Alverno College (WI) in the 1980s and continuing today, has helped focus attention on learning outcomes. Several of the regional accrediting associations have provided leadership in assisting colleges to become more learning centered by requiring more attention to learning outcomes and outcomes assessment. The national effort to establish skill standards and the various state efforts to implement performance-based funding are more recent manifestations of the continuing goal of colleges to become learning centered.

Learning contracts, behavioral objectives, competency-based education, learning outcomes, skill standards, and performance-based funding are all variations on the theme of the notion of learning centeredness. The vision statement of Palomar College (CA) captures the essence of what it means to be learning centered.

*Our new vision statement reflects a subtle but nonetheless profound shift in how we think of the college and what we do. We have shifted from an identification with process to an identification with results. We are no longer content with merely providing quality instruction. We will judge ourselves henceforth on the quality of student learning we produce. And further, we will judge ourselves by our ability to produce ever greater and more sophisticated student learning and meaningful educational success with each passing year, each exiting student, and each graduating class.*

## The Difference

As stated earlier, even though there have been two distinctive streams in education—one learner centered and the other learning centered—many educators still

treat the concepts as if they were synonymous. An illustration may clarify the difference.

A client (student, customer, learner) decides to go to an expensive spa for a week to lose five pounds (behavioral objective, learning outcome, exit competency). The client is treated exceedingly well in keeping with the high fees paid. Facials and body wraps are provided daily along with a special diet of spa cuisine. The surroundings are beautifully landscaped; soft music plays in the background; the hectic pace of the outside world is soon forgotten. There are many options to choose from including aerobics, hip-hop classes, guided walks, meditation, and quiet moments of reading. The client is pampered beyond his wildest dreams. The spa is truly client centered, student centered, customer centered, learner centered.

At the end of the week the client packs to leave the spa and, as a final act of self-assessment, steps on the scale in his well-appointed bathroom. To his dismay not one pound has been lost. He has paid a high price for a learner-centered experience but did not achieve his learning-centered goal of losing five pounds.

It is not enough to make students feel good about the environment on the campus or the services they receive. It is not enough to impress students with the dazzling performance of great lecturers. It is not enough to provide all the latest in information technology. If we cannot document expanded or improved learning—however defined and however measured—we cannot say with any assurance that learning has occurred. And it is much more likely that we will be able to document learning when we place high value on learning-centered policies, programs, and practices and when we employ personnel who know how to create learning outcomes, learning options, and learning-centered activities.

Fortunately, we do not have to choose between learner-centered and learning-centered perspectives. In a Learning College it is important for faculty and staff to be both. The Learning College integrates these concepts and requires both care and service for the individual and attention to quality learning outcomes.

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