

# THE USE OF STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH AT LESSON

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*Annotation: This article presents a reflective case study analysis of an attempt to enhance student learning through the introduction of student-centred teaching methods in a masters-level social research methods subject. The introduction of a range of specific techniques, including case study teaching, problem based learning, group-work, role-play and simulation, is reflected upon. The article concludes that the re-orientation of the curriculum toward student-centeredness in this case had a positive effect on student performance, learning experience and subject evaluation. In particular, the use of student-centred techniques facilitated a strong social context for learning, and provided students with a common experiential framework from which to explore the technical aspects of the curriculum. However, the analysis also found that students continued to place value on more formal teaching methods, and that the value of student-centred techniques in this case rested in the way in which they were integrated with more didactic teaching practice.*

**Keywords:** research methods; student-centred learning; small group teaching.

This article seeks to explore the practice of effective small group teaching of social research methods, using what might be broadly framed as a student-centred approach. The specific focus of analysis is the introduction of a range of interactive learning activities into the curriculum of a masters-level research methods subject in the area of policy studies. These changes to practice was made in response to the dual

challenges of teaching effectively with experientially diverse student groups, and making the research methods curriculum interesting and relevant to these groups.

The approach adopted was informed by an interest in the related concepts of effective teaching in small groups, and student-centred approaches to learning and teaching.

Student-centred Approaches Using Interactive Learning Activities in Small Group Teaching: The Enactment of Constructivist Learning Theory? Pedagogically, student, or learner, centred approaches to teaching have emerged from changing understandings of the nature of learning and, in particular, from the body of learning theory known as constructivism. In the broadest terms, constructivist learning is based on an understanding that learners construct knowledge for themselves (Hein, 1991; Krause et al, 2003). As Maypole and Davies (2001) have observed, constructivist theories encompass a disparate array of philosophical, psychological and epistemological orientations. One of the key distinctions within this broad theoretical 'camp' is that between cognitive and social constructivism. Cognitive constructivism is based on Piaget's model, which emphasises the interaction between the individual and their environment in constructing meaningful knowledge, whereas social constructivism – attributed to the work of Vygotsky – emphasises the importance of student learning through interaction with the teacher and other students (Jadallah, 2000; Maypole & Davies, 2001). Insofar as the changes to teaching practice discussed in this article subscribe to constructivist approaches to learning and teaching, they adhere to the social constructivist orientation. Hence, the emphasis in the teaching practices reflected on here is on building the social context for learning, and on facilitating student learning through small group activity and encouragement of high levels of peer to peer, and learner to teacher interaction. While constructivism encompasses a broad array of understandings of learning theory and practice, the common thread running through this body of theory is the value placed on student-centred learning (Maypole & Davies, 2001).

The principal implication of constructivist understandings for the way in which knowledge is produced is that students are the key initiators and architects of their own learning and knowledge-making, rather than passive ‘vessels’ who receive the transmission of knowledge from ‘expert’ teachers. Student-centred learning (and teaching) has itself been variously defined as a process by which students are given greater autonomy and control over the choice of subject matter, the pace of learning, and the learning methods used (Gibbs, 1992), a mechanism for higher education reform, by which students have individual control over higher education finance via a voucher system (West, 1998), and a broad approach to teaching that ultimately holds the student responsible for own educational advanced.

### Critical Reflections on Student-Centred Teaching

As suggested by the teaching and learning experience discussed above, utilising teaching approaches that encourage students’ active and experiential engagement with the subject matter (and with each other) has the potential to be extremely effective, in terms of student satisfaction and class performance. This is particularly notable in the context of a research methods subject, given that research methods is traditionally considered to lend itself to more didactic approaches where vast amounts of technical information are transmitted from teacher to student.

The shift toward student-centeredness through the use of interactive small group activities based on primary resources appears to have significantly enhanced students’ learning in this case. The classroom experience was characterised by a high level of dialogue and interaction, the assessment results suggest overall strong engagement with the subject matter, and student feedback was very positive. One of the key strengths of this approach was that it allowed students to build common experiential ground, which provided a shared base for engaging with more technical aspects of the subject matter. This is increasingly important in higher education contexts where

flexible learning pathways are producing diverse student cohorts with no, or highly limited, common learning experiences.

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