5 Ways to Make Your Classroom Student-Centered

By Marcia Powell

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What interests you? Sports? Historical novels? Cars? Finding crafty ideas on Pinterest? For adults, making choices is the norm. We're motivated by stimuli that we value, by our passions. If ideas hold no personal interest for us, we often quit, unless a relationship or reward is involved.

Our students aren't so different. Expert teachers know how to give students choice and voice, finding ways to design learning experiences that tap into what students value. This isn't always easy, especially if our preparation experiences didn't frame learning this way. Here are five questions that can help us develop and refine the teacher strengths needed for creating a student-centered classroom. Use them to start the new year off right!

1. How does the classroom environment promote interaction among learners—and how do you operate in that environment? 

Student-centered classrooms are big on collaboration, which means they don't usually have rows of desks facing a teacher lectern or desk. Instead, desks or tables are arranged so that it's easy for students to collaborate on projects or on analyzing readings (rather than listening to lectures). And whether teachers are leading lessons on protein synthesis or the issues leading up to a world conflict, we make the most of these possibilities.

Teacher strength: giving up absolute control. The teacher becomes a participant and co-learner in discussion, asking questions and perhaps correcting misconceptions, but not telling learners what they need to know.

2. What kind of assessments do you use?

Student-centered assessments ask open-ended questions that force learners to reflect and synthesize what they have learned. They demand that students access higher orders of thinking.

For example, traditionally, students might learn about velocity by reading (or listening to a lecture), completing worksheets, then answering multiple-choice questions. But if a student maps a local route and tracks the time for different legs of a journey using something similar to MapMyRun, they can determine average velocities for each segment of a journey. The data will be individualized, as will the route and the calculations. Assessment can be a creative product and process that involves student choice.

Teacher strength: valuing student engagement over convenience. It's easier to scan a bubble test, or run it through a script like Flubaroo. But these assessments do not
tell us nearly as much about critical thinking—or students’ progress toward the Common Core State Standards. Creating and completing meaningful assessments is hard (but worthwhile) work for both teacher and students.

3. How do you respond to a lack of buy-in? No matter how well-intentioned we may be about student engagement, we sometimes miss the mark.

This past week, when studying sound waves, my 9th grade science students created instruments—flutes, pan pipes, wind chimes, and water bells, all tuned to specific frequencies. For the first time in years, kids didn’t care for this assignment, but I noticed they loved using Audacity to record their instruments. Even after completing the day’s assignment, they kept looking at different tools in the program.

I thought about it on the way home and the next day I shifted gears. The original plan had been to continue our study of frequency, wavelength, and sound concepts by creating a class concert (as in years past). But instead, I decided to ask students to explore autotune and show choir mash-ups, studying the same concepts. Students still recorded songs using software, changed the sound characteristics, and played the resulting jams for one another.

**Teacher strength: honoring student passion and interest.** Both approaches would have taught my students what they needed to know about sound. But learning must matter to the learner; in this case, I realized my students were less interested in creating their own instruments than in understanding how technology can influence personal musical taste.

To activate this strength takes flexibility, resourcefulness, sensitivity to student needs, and a deep understanding of content—all of which require even the most experienced teacher to stay on his or her toes.

4. Which is more important to you: compliance or knowledge? Occasionally we come across learners who drive most of their teachers crazy. They text on the sly, don’t hand in homework, read unrelated books during class time. Backing them into a corner is an understandable reaction: “Dude, you’re in my class to do my work.” It can be *almost* infuriating when this learner takes the test and aced it: He or she understands the content and is competent at what you have to offer.

What happens when you meet these learners? Does a yearlong power struggle begin ... or do you rethink your plans, looking to online resources like [MIT OpenCourseWare](https://www.mit.edu/) to challenge even your most advanced learners?

**Teacher strength: admitting you do not have the market cornered on knowledge.** The truth is that 21st-century learning is focused more on creation and critical thinking than on compliance. Most of us were formed in a teaching crucible that emphasized our wisdom and students’ compliance. Shifting our perspective means that students take on more active roles as learners and that our roles change, too. We must decide whether to think and act as facilitators who empower (and learn from) our students—or as the people guarding the vault.

5. If learners weren’t required to come to your class, would they? Ask yourself this difficult but honest question: Is there joy in the journey we are taking together? It’s one of the most difficult tasks in teaching, because it asks us to consider the learner as a part of our community, rather than just a mind to fill. Asking this question—and responding to the answer—requires a combination of flexibility, humor, and the ability to try new things, fail, and laugh when things work out ... and when they don’t.
Teacher strength: developing healthy relationships with learners. You've heard all the warnings before: Don't let them see you smile, don’t communicate with them via social media, don’t let them know that you aren’t the expert. But it just doesn’t work that way in our own lives. If we sincerely believe in lifelong learning and commit to modeling it, we'll be honest with one another, cajoling, encouraging, and mentoring with challenging and appropriate dialogue.

Here's the great news. These strengths can be developed! Pick one that you aren't doing as well as you want and work on it for 2014. Ask a colleague to be an accountability partner. Grant yourself extra reflection time. And start with small changes. If you are in a leadership position, empower another to take a chance and build a better classroom for students. Inspiration, interest, and happy learners—isn’t that a great resolution for the upcoming semester?

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