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Book Excerpt -Eight Reasons Students Resist Learner Centered Teaching

The following is from my book *Helping Students Learn in a Learner Centered Environment*

Eight Reasons Students Resist Learner Centered Teaching (LCT)

1. Old habits die hard
2. High schools remain teacher-centered institutions
3. Learning is not a top reason students give for attending college
4. Students don't like taking learning risks
5. LCT doesn't resemble what students think of as school
6. Students don't want to give more effort and LCT requires it
7. Students' mindsets about learning make adapting to LCT more difficult
8. Many students follow the path of least resistance in their learning

1. Old Habits Die Hard

A new study in the Oct. 20, 2005, issue of *Nature*, led by Ann Graybiel of MIT's McGovern Institute found:

“although habits help us through the day, eliminating the need to strategize about each tiny step involved in driving to work and other complex routines, habits (especially bad habits), can have a vise grip on both mind and behavior. Important neural activity patterns in a specific region of the brain change when habits are formed, change again when habits are broken, but quickly re-emerge when something rekindles an extinguished habit — routines that originally took great effort to learn”. (Graybiel ,2005 p.)

The expectations our students have for their roles and responsibilities as college learners are based on strongly formed habits learned through twelve or more years of teacher- centered instruction. These habits include such things as sitting quietly, doing the homework the teacher assigned, taking lecture notes, and answering multiple choice questions .After twelve years, school has a very familiar pattern to it.

Our student's previous learning experiences have stressed the importance of memorization over learning with understanding. Many, as well, focus on facts and details rather than larger themes of causes and consequences of events. The shortfalls of these approaches are not apparent if the only test of learning involves tests of memory. When the transfer of learning is measured, as will be the case in a learner centered classroom, the shortfalls become very apparent. (Bransford et al., 1999, p8.) It will take our students time and a great deal of practice to develop a new set of learning habits. We should anticipate that occasionally they will fall back into their old ways, as old habits die hard.

2. High Schools Remain Teacher Centered Institutions

I want to be clear that I have great respect for my colleagues that teach in our public and private secondary schools. Their work is vital to the welfare of all Americans; the teaching they do is filled with difficult challenges. However, the research on American high schools indicates they are teacher-centered, not learner-centered.

"Despite the efforts of many, the organization and structure of most comprehensive high schools look very similar to those of high schools of generations ago. High schools have stood still amidst a maelstrom of educational and economic change swirling around them (The National Commission on the High School Senior Year in 2001, p.20).

Because our high schools have not changed it is fair to assume that our students will expect to use the same high school learning habits when they enter college. Our students are most likely to maintain a simple philosophy—if it is not broken, don't fix it.

3. Learning is Not a Top Reason Students Give for Attending College

Laurence Steinberg, in his ten year study of high school students, reported in his 1996 book *Beyond the Classroom* that the most common reason students gave for trying in school was not interest in the subject but getting good grades so they could get into college. Perhaps even more disconcerting is the finding Levine and Cureton reported in their 1998 book *When Hope and Fear Collide* that 37% of students indicated if they thought college wasn't helping their job chances, they would drop out (p.116). Many first-year college students are sick to death of school by age eighteen and see college as just the last hurdle to be crossed (Leamson 1999, p.35).

4. Students Don't Like Taking Learning Risks

Thomas Edison failed 2000 times to find the material that would eventually become the filament for the light bulb. When asked about it he said I didn't fail, I simply found 2000 things that don't work to make a light bulb. Unfortunately, this positive view of taking risks and learning from failure is not the dominate mindset of most college students. Teachers know that learning anything entails taking some risks and confronting the possibility of failure. But as we grow older we develop a great tendency to hide from failure (Tagg, 2003 p. 54). Students that have an orientation that sees failure as an enemy to be avoided can produce a response of helplessness in potential learning situations that repeatedly and systematically inhibit their learning (Dweck, 2000). Students that don't take risks and make mistakes, which are the very actions successful thinkers must do are in the business of protecting their unblemished record of mediocrity (Covington, 1992, p. 231). Despite growing up as risk takers many students fail to maintain a willingness to take risks in a school environment.

5. LCT Doesn't Resemble What Students Know as School

By age 18, our students have spent 70% of their lives in school (Leamson, p.35), with each school year looking a great deal like the year before. Our students know school is most often a place where the teacher does the talking, and the students do the listening, note taking or worksheet completing and take tests that are multiple choice, matching, true and false or essay. They know their teachers' communication with them most often takes the form of directions like sit down and be quiet, turn in your homework, open your book to page and please be respectful of others. Students also know school as a place where they are often given time to do their homework in class and effort is rewarded with a passing grade. The learning choices students they are given are usually limited to the topic they would like to write on, or choosing their own book for a book report. The only other choice given is to do their work and pass or not do their work and fail. The only area of real control students are given over their learning is the degree to which they choose to engage in the learning process and that control is limited by the consequences that come with choosing not to engage.

It is easy to see how our students would be tentative, cautious and rather uncomfortable in a learner centered environment having never experienced a learning environment where meaningful control and choices about learning were offered or opportunities existed to do a great deal of first hand learning. It is also not surprising that these students would get upset by a learning approach where the role of the teacher has change so much that it appears as if the teacher isn't doing his or her job.

From our students' perspective, if the teacher isn't talking they are not teaching. The teacher as facilitator is a role students have rarely seen their college teachers playing

Another common student reaction to a learner centered environment is “this isn’t what I paid for. I paid for someone to teach me.” There is a clear disconnect between what we want them to do in a learner-centered classroom and what they see as their role in the learning process.

6. Students Don’t Want to Give More Effort

Another common complaint faculty hear from students is that learner centered teaching requires more work. This observation by our students is correct. I regularly tell faculty that it is the *one who does the work that does the learning*, Our students will be asked to do more firsthand work, more team and group work, more research and investigation, more reflection and more talking and listening. All of these learning activities require a certain amount of effort; they are not passive, sit there and listen to the teacher activities.

K. Patricia Cross in her 2001 talk Motivation Er... will that be on the test? in discussing American students’ views about effort said:

“One of the oddities of traditional American culture, especially the youth culture, is that it is better to be thought lazy than stupid. Thus, in the competition of the classroom, students prefer to be seen by others as succeeding through ability rather than through effort.”

In other words giving more effort is not only disdained because it means more work but also because in our American culture many students believe if you have to work at it you must not be very smart.

7. Students’ Mindsets Towards Learning Make Adapting to LCT More Difficult.

Thousands of students each semester pay tuition to take courses in subject areas they firmly believe they cannot learn. This strange scenario occurs because of the fixed mindset these students have developed about learning a particular subject (Dweck, 2006). Students with a fixed mindset view intelligence and ability as fundamentally fixed at birth and unchangeable. These students see themselves and others as smart, average or dumb. Students with fixed mindsets spend a great deal of effort trying to prove their “smart” by avoiding failure. This effort to avoid failure actually prevents them for engaging in activities that would ironically make them smarter. When it comes to certain school subjects a student with a fixed mindset believes you either get it or you don’t. The majority of college students have this fixed mindset towards some of their subjects (Covington 1992). This is also the main perspective found among high school students.

(Steinberg 1996)

*It should be noted that Dweck has found that a mindset can change from domain to domain, for example extracurricular activities versus academic activities, and people can be taught to develop a new mindset

This mindset has a profound impact upon students' views of a variety of learning related actions including seeing effort in certain learning activities as being of little or no use. This fixed mindset means tutoring, study buddies, or visit to our offices for extra help all appear to be a waste of time to our students. Helping our students to understand that they hold a false belief about their learning capacity and that effort, time and effective teaching can result in success in any subject is crucial to optimizing our students learning opportunities. It is one of the most important actions we can take to assist our students in finding success

The opposite of a fixed mindset is a Growth Mindset. Students with a growth mindset believe "that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts (Dweck, 2006, p.7) They believe that " a person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable); that it's impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil and training."(p.7) Students with a growth mindset take learning risks and view failure only as a message that they need to figure out what they did wrong and work harder to improve.

The mindset of students also has a significant impact on the kinds of goals they set as learners. There is general agreement that two types of goals may be set by students. One is a learning goal which is described as the desire to increasing one's competency, understanding, and appreciation for what is being learned. The other is a performance goal. This goal involves out performing others as a means to aggrandize one's ability status at the expense of peers (Covington, 2000). Or to put it another way, a performance goal setters wants to look good by making others look bad.

The specific hypothesis put forward by those who study this area is twofold: first, that learning goals favor deep-level, strategic-processing of information, leading to increased school achievement; increased pride and satisfaction in learning successes and being better able to handle failure if it occurs. (Ames 1992, Jagacinski & Nicholls 1984, 1987). The second part of the hypothesis being, that performance goals trigger superficial, rote-level processing that exerts a stultifying influence on achievement. (Covington p.173) Performance goals are about getting positive judgments of your competence and avoiding negative ones while learning goals are about increasing your competency (Dweck p.15) Learning goals and performance goals are not mutually exclusive; one can value the task itself and the outcome of the task. (Hagen and Weinstein, 1995)

8. Many Students Follow the Path of Least Resistance in their Learning

I regularly describe students that take the path of least resistance as minimalist learners. These are students that adhere to the philosophy: "What is the least I have to do to get the grade that I need." Their regular questions include how many points is this worth?" Followed by how many points do I need to get an A, B or C grade. These questions reflect a life time of learning in an environment where trying to gain a reward or avoid a punishment was the goal. The goal of minimalist learners is the grade not the learning. A students' motivation for learning has a big impact on what path they take as learners. Research on motivation of student learners has focused on two distinct incentive systems over the past several years. Martin Covington offered this description of the two systems:

"The first system assumes that students are optimally motivated by there being fewer rewards than there are players in the learning game, i.e. turning students into competitors for recognition and further advancement. This model derives much of its justification from the view of motives-as-drives, which typically considers motivation an enabling factor, i.e. the means to superior performance. This scarcity of rewards disrupts learning by encouraging negative achievement goals, such as avoiding failure, rather than positive goals, such as striving for success. Special attention is given to the particularly devastating impact of reward scarcity on disenfranchised students and students of color, as well as on teachers themselves." (Covington, 2000 *Goal Theory, Motivation and School Achievement: An Integrative Review*. p. 172)

The second incentive system that is viewed as an alternative to the competitive model assumes,

"That motivation is optimal when there exists an abundance of payoffs for learning, and payoffs of many kinds, not just tangible, extrinsic rewards like grades or gold stars but also intrinsic sources of satisfaction, as well as a variety of ways in which to earn these rewards, ways suited to individual learning styles. This model reflects an emphasis on motives-as-goals that draw, not drive, individuals toward action, and generally for ennobling reasons: for the sake of curiosity, exploration, and self-improvement." (Covington, p.172)

This second incentive system is an integral part of a learner centered approach to instruction. Main stream authors like Alfie Kohn in his book *Punished by Rewards* go so far as to suggest that the use of rewards will likely reduce students' learning because it makes the reward rather than the leaning the goal of the schooling process.