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# Teacher-Centred Teaching is Alive and Well

TOH KOK AUN

Over a period of close to 30 years that I have been associated with schools and teaching, the one thing that has struck me is the familiar pattern with which teaching is carried out in many different schools. What happens is almost exactly what I remembered from the primary and secondary school classrooms that I was in as a student in the 1950s -- one that would have been categorised as wholly teacher-centred. We sat in rows then, discussions were teacher-led with the teacher spending 90% of instructional time teaching the entire class. This uniformity in instructional style, irrespective of time and school, appears to be linked to the apparent invulnerability of teachers to change (Cuban, 1979). This is not to say that there were no changes being instituted over this period. What I am saying is that instructional style remains unchanged, impervious to any proposed changes, much like stormy weather when typhoon winds sweep across the ocean waters while underneath, near the ocean floor, relative calm prevails.

I refer to the seemingly stubborn promulgation of the teacher-centred approach in classroom instruction. I do not find much evidence of significant change in instructional style despite the inputs of pre-service training and the many findings of research in professional journals arguing for reformation towards instruction that is more student-centred. The evidence, from my personal observation, suggests that teaching practices seem remarkably stable at all levels of schooling through the many decades, despite improvements in teacher education and inputs of scholarly knowledge.

## **Operationalising teacher- and student-centred instruction**

At this point it is useful to operationalise what is meant by teacher- and student-centred instruction. Teacher-centred

instruction means that the teacher controls what is taught and under what conditions. Someone who enters a classroom with teacher-centred instruction would be able to identify the following elements:

- teacher talk exceeds student talk during instruction;
- instruction is mostly with the entire class;
- textbooks guide what is being taught in class;
- each episode within the lesson is determined by the teacher;
- desks and chairs are usually arranged into neat rows facing the chalkboard;
- students are not free to roam from their seats.

Student-centred instruction means that students assume a certain degree of responsibility for what is taught and how it is learned. There is a slant towards experiential learning and making discoveries for themselves (Martin et al., 1994). The following elements are what one would observe in a class with student-centred instruction:

- student on-task conversation or talk is at least equal to, if not greater than teacher talk;
- instruction occurs individually or in small groups, rather than being directed as an entire class by the teacher;
- a variety of instructional materials are on hand to enable students to use them independently or in small groups;
- students, through their interaction with the teacher, determine the direction of the lesson;
- furniture in the classroom is arranged in a manner which facilitates students to work together independently or in groups;

- students roam about freely, if need be, while on-task.

Why is one particular tradition flourishing so well, while the other has not taken off? To begin with, it is useful to examine the interaction, in each case, of both the teacher and the learner to the knowledge to be acquired. In teacher-centred instruction knowledge is often (though not always) presented to the learner assuming the latter as a *tabular rasa* or *blank slate*. In student-centred instruction, knowledge is often *discovered* by the learner, capitalising on the innate inquisitiveness of the learner. Which of the two constitutes good teaching? If the criteria of judging good teaching is measured by teachers' success in creating an atmosphere where students want to learn, then the latter would score highly as the preferred method. On the face of it, it would therefore appear strange that teachers should continue to cling to the teacher-centred approach.

Recent research has brought up the importance of constructivism (Cheung and Toh, 1992). If students construct new knowledge out of the experiences they encounter, then it makes sense for the teacher to grasp some part of their experience and connect it to the knowledge to be taught. To ensure student understanding requires active student involvement in what is to be learned, giving them as many opportunities as possible to practise what has been learnt. Constructivism is tilted towards student-centred practices. Why then are teachers not using the student-centred approach? A number of reasons can be advanced for this "hesitancy" of teachers making such a headlong change.

### **Reasons for inertia to change**

The first reason has to do with tradition and cultural beliefs. The Eastern way of upbringing is guided by a deep reverence for the accumulated wisdom of their elders. The *teacher knows best* attitude not only gives the teacher the passport to practise the teacher-centred approach, but also the upholding of such a virtue by the students cements the validity of such an approach. A teacher who passes on the responsibility of learning to the learner is viewed in some ways with suspicion, and would derail their reverence for the teacher as a know-all. The persistence of the teacher-centred

approach by virtue of such traditions may not be true for the Western culture but is something which may well be empowering in the Eastern tradition.

The second reason is one which may be attributed to performance orientation of society at large. Classrooms are dominated with teaching practices that concentrate on definite content and skills that have to be learnt in order to pass their examinations. With such an orientation there is the tendency of students to prefer teachers giving them the relevant information in an authoritative way through a teacher-centred approach rather than allowing them to *discover* on their own. To them it is a practicality issue, and discovery tantamounts to a waste of time. A fundamental shift from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred one therefore does not go down well with students. Hence the prevailing teacher-centred practices continue to reign supreme because of this student-driven behaviour.

Thirdly, the question of inertia is important. Why do something else when all the while you are doing alright with the teacher-centred approach? This inertia stems from the freedom of choice given to classroom teachers. Policy makers and curriculum developers do not insist but encourage the use of student-centred approaches, and allow teachers to actually weigh the pros and cons of the approach in the actual implementation of a curriculum, with the hope that they will change in the face of research evidence. The hoped-for change has not come about. Instead, what has resulted is teachers adopting bits of student-centred activities that suit them for their use, but by and large the dominant mode of instruction remains as a teacher-centred one.

The fourth reason is an organisational structure which does not facilitate a switch over from a teacher-centred approach to one which is student-centred. Structure here refers to the physical arrangement of desks and chairs in the classrooms, the amount of content to be covered, the time allotted to tasks, and the way the examination questions are framed. As long as organisational structures are non-existent, what is being promoted will be lip service. Teachers have coped with multiple demands by adopting certain teaching practices that have emerged as resilient and time-tested strategies. Any

switchover will mean convincing them first. The seating arrangement in the classroom, made up of rows, permit easy surveillance and thus maintenance of order. Any unsolicited movement from their seats is frowned upon. Class routines require students to raise their hands, and to answer only when the teacher says so. Students can leave the room only when permission is granted by the teacher. All these are valuable controls when you have a large class to manage and you do not have with you those who are motivated to learn. In this context the teacher-centred approach is seen as an efficient strategy. Student-centred approaches where students move around freely, as well as being allowed to determine what is to be done for themselves, can ruin the usual teacher routines. With the existing organisational structure teachers are not likely to trade-off their time-tested teacher-centred approaches for one over which they have little control.

Lastly, one need to recognise that all teachers entering the teaching profession have unwittingly served as an apprentice as they watch their teachers teach when they were students in school for 12 years or so. This *apprenticeship* tends to provide stability over time. The methods promulgated by teachers, learned in their own school days, seem to enable the class to prod along satisfactorily. Instead of making fundamental shifts, the survival instinct would favour tinkering with methods, fine tuning the already familiar techniques, and adding a variation or two to existing ones.

These reasons, collectively and individually, serve to explain how well teacher-centred teaching has survived the test of time.

## **Conclusion**

The particular preference of teachers for teacher-centred instruction must appear as a rejection for a more student-centred approach to instruction. Before I am taken to task for attempting to identify these two instructional modes as the sole prevailing practices, I hasten to add that these two practices are the extremes of a continuum and that most teachers operate at some point on the continuum. Teachers are bound to adopt into their act particular practices they find useful. A science teacher who may find the discovery style approach overly radical and feel the loss of control on

how the class should progress, may adopt a guided-discovery style as a compromise. Such a teacher would be considered to have selectively adopted child-centred practices. The teacher would be deemed to be operating somewhere along the continuum. Along the continuum there would be instances of teacher-centred instruction, as well as those of student-centred instruction. Instead of a quantum leap from one approach to another, one can view the situation as teachers taking incremental steps from one extreme to the other.

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