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Do learners want to be centred? : Learner Centred Education in Communicative Language Teaching

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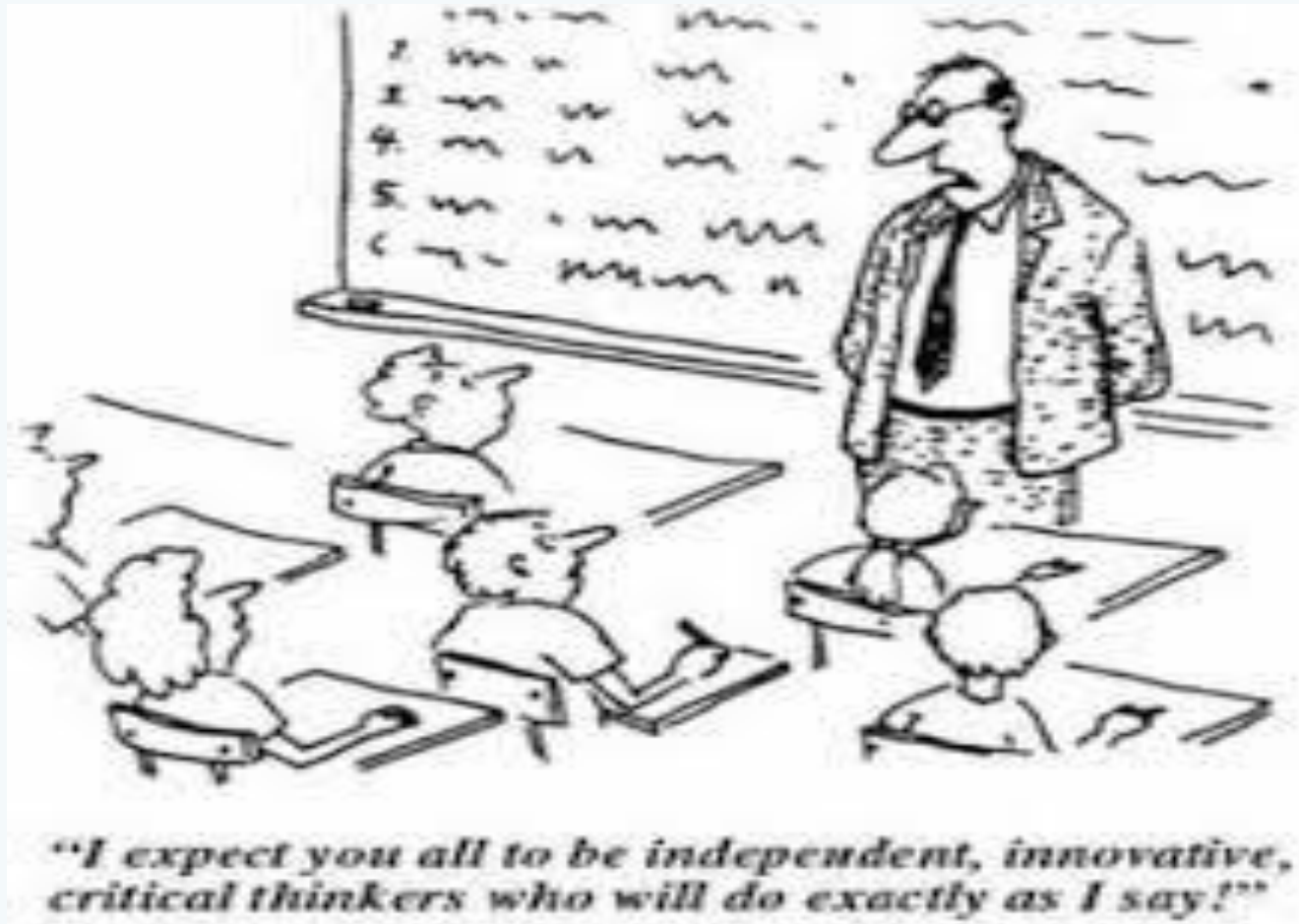
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advancement
of learning
& ennoblement
of life

What does 'learner-centred education' mean to you?

Poll



Where did the idea of 'learner-centred' come from anyway?

- Rooted in philosophy of individualism

Individualism believes in the right of the individual to freedom and self-realization (Rousseau, Locke)

- Key figures in development include:

Maria Montessori

Lev Vygotsky

Jean Piaget

- Much of the early work was done with children: HE and lifelong learning came to the idea rather late
- Key concepts in LCE are choice and responsibility



The Theory of Learner Centred Education

- **Usually framed in opposition to something else:**
 - Learner-centred NOT teacher-centred**
 - Teacher as facilitator NOT teacher as instructor**
 - Learners as active NOT learners as passive**
- **Based on constructivist learning theory emphasising the need for the learners to create, construct and co-construct meaning for themselves.**
- **Learner-centred education seeks to put learners' needs and interests first and acknowledge student voice**
- **Recognises individual differences in learners and encourages learner autonomy and active learning**
- **May have gained popularity in HE with shift towards view of students as customers / consumers / clients**

Diametric Opposition

Teacher-centred or Traditional Education

Negative connotations:

- Authoritarian
- Memorisation & rote learning
- One size fits all approach
- Knowledge transmission
- Empty vessel / blank slate view of learners



Learner Centred Education and Communicative Language Teaching

- **Necessity under CLT principles to allow learners opportunity to communicate and use language themselves -> a more LCE approach**
- CLT principles include a social constructivist underpinning; language and meaning are socially constructed, in conjunction with others.
- **Theories of communicative competence (Chomsky, Hymes, Widdowson)**
- **Social constructivist approach taken even further with Dogme – only materials needed are people who can co-create knowledge**
- Typically beginning teachers will be warned against too much TTT – a warning against a teacher-centred approach as well as language overload?

Positives

- **Learner-centred education is endorsed by many, including international organisations like UNICEF and UNESCO.**
- **What research there is on student perceptions of LCE shows a generally positive attitude**
- **LCE allows for and celebrates individual differences**
- **LCE wants learning and teaching to work for the learners**
- **The underlying theories have great transformative power – choice, responsibility and empowerment**



Sliced Bread:

An invention surpassed
by nearly everything
since 1928.



Best thing since sliced bread?

‘A major philosophy underlying LCE is informed by the view that pedagogy should enable and enhance democracy, social justice, individual freedom and creativity, and generate power to challenge authority and transform society, and to build critical thinking capability.’ (Le Ha, 2014)

‘LCE has policy and practice realities, along a continuum, but it also has a rich life as an ill-defined but very powerful discourse. They describe learner-centred as a ‘hooray word’ which legitimises and shapes action (Harber & Davies, 1997: 111). Calling teaching learner-centred helps to give practice an aura of legitimacy in many circles, regardless of where it sits on the continuum...’ (Schweisfurth, 2013, p18)

Critiques of learner-centred education

As teachers, what kinds of criticism do you have of either the theory or the implementation of LCE?

What kinds of criticism do you think your students might offer?

Think – Pair – Share

(a typical example of a ‘learner-centred’ classroom activity!)

Critiques of learner-centred education

- **Native-speakerism – Holliday, 2006**

‘An underlying theme is the “othering” of students and colleagues from outside the English-speaking West, according to essentialist regional or religious cultural stereotypes, especially when they have difficulty with the specific types of active, collaborative and self-directed “learner-centred” teaching.’

- **Imposing power relations – often imposed from top-down, or outside-in. (Schweisfurth, 2013)**
- **Lack of clarity about what LCE actually means in practice**
- **Connection with view of learner/student as customer – should education follow this model?**
- **Lack of student voice with regards to its implementation**

Critique



Is Learner Centred Education always the best approach?

LCE puts the focus on the individual learners' needs and interests; sounds great!

But:

- **Differing cultural backgrounds view education differently**
- **What about groups and especially large class sizes? Is it possible to 'centre' lots of different individuals at the same time?**
- **What content to teach if students have a wide variety of needs and interests?**
- **Whole class teaching / direct instruction can be very effective**
- **Learners don't always 'buy in' to the idea of LCE, particularly when it's very different from their norm**
- **LCE often relies on learners taking responsibility for their learning – what if they don't?**
- **Is learner-centred assessment practical or feasible?**

Does it have to be a dichotomy?

Traditional teaching Direct instruction	Discovery learning Activity-based learning
Teacher as 'instructor' Teacher as 'knowledge provider'	Teacher as 'facilitator' Teacher as 'resource provider'
Focus on teacher	Focus on learners
Active teacher, Passive learners	Active learners, Passive teachers

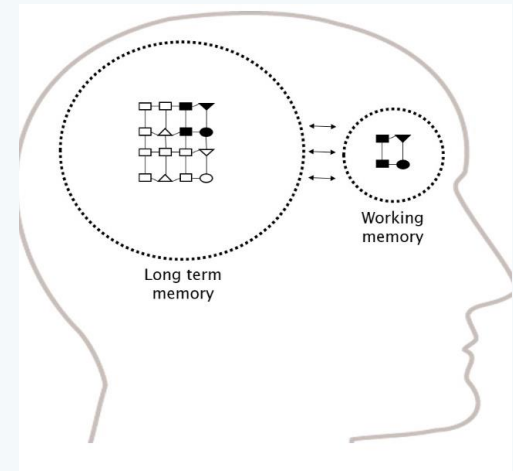
Why a dichotomy is unhelpful

Evidence shows that discovery learning is often less effective than direct instruction. (Kirschner et al, 2006)

Problem-solving approaches -> working memory overload -> difficulty with long-term memory storage.

Meta-analyses and large-scale studies back this up: direct instruction is a valid teaching approach with better results than 'discovery learning' or hands-off approaches. (Hattie, 2009)

'Teacher as activator' approaches were significantly more effective than 'teacher as facilitator'.



What if...?



So, what does good learning look like?

Schweisfurth (2013) proposed 7 minimum standards:

Criteria
Lessons are engaging & learners motivated
Atmosphere of mutual respect
Learning builds on existing knowledge
Curriculum is relevant to learners' needs
Dialogue in teaching & learning
Skills & attitude outcomes as well as content outcomes: critical & creative thinking
Assessments test skills, allow for individual differences, not purely content-focused

Demand High!

Learner centred teaching often ensures that learners are active and engaged.

But are they actively learning? Or simply performing tasks they can already do?

Learning-centred teaching would focus more on finding the limits of where learners can perform, and stretching them.

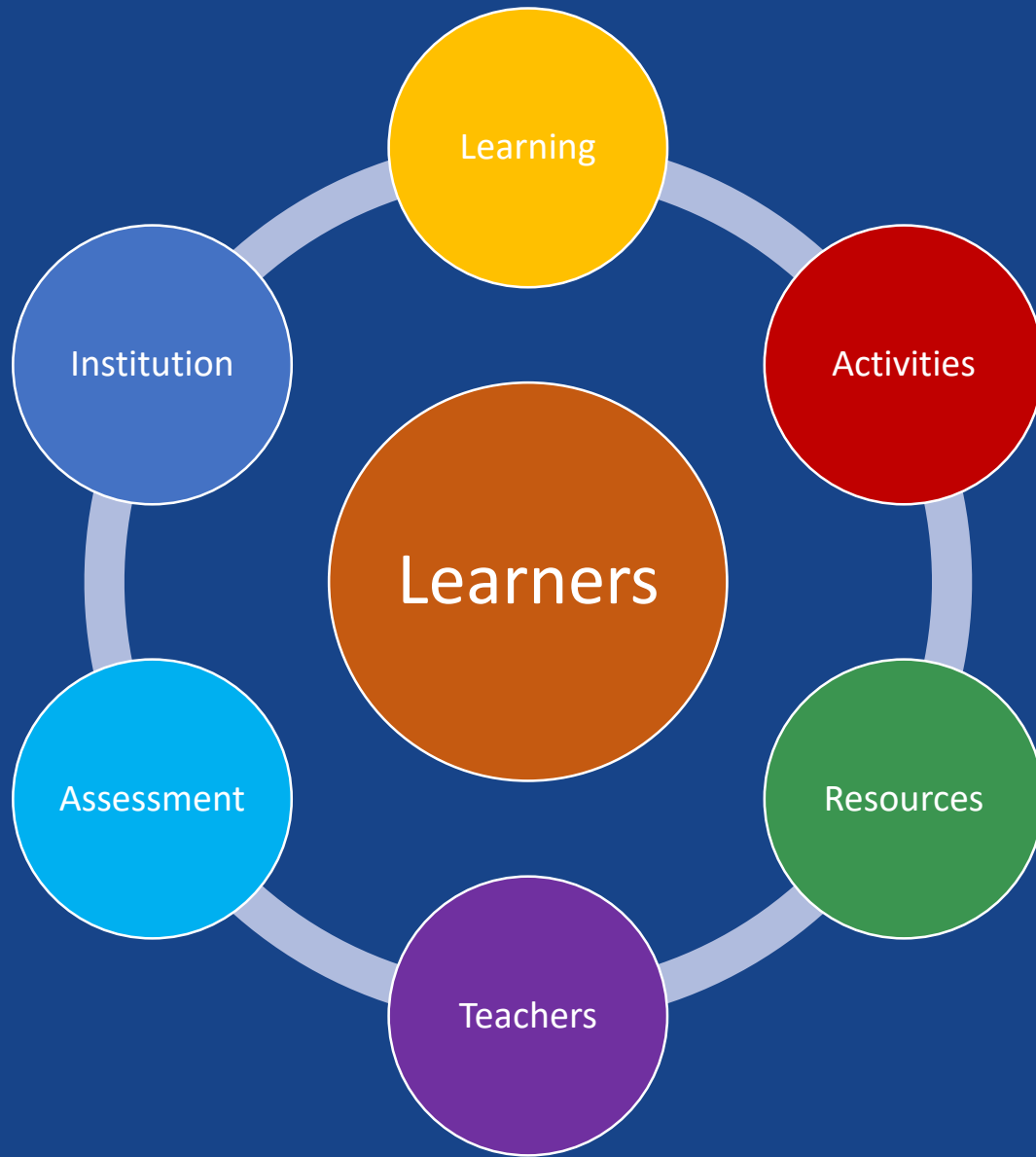
Vygotsky – Zone of Proximal Development



The Demand High Teaching Movement (Scrivener & Underhill)

<https://demandhighelt.wordpress.com/what-is-demand-high/>

<https://demandhighelt.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/ejal-article-demand-high-learning-jim-scrivener.pdf>



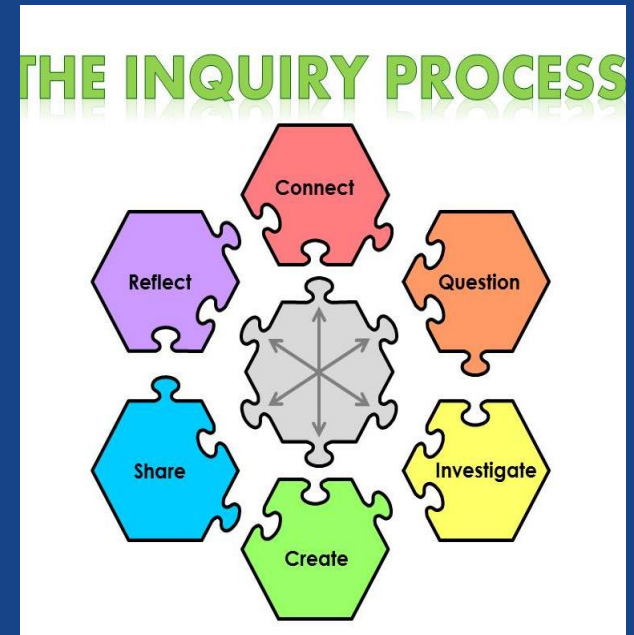


Over to you

Are there any learner- or learning-centred changes that you are considering making to your classes this year? How will the change focus on learning?

Is there something you already do with your classes that you feel really challenges your learners to push their limits and maximise their learning?

You may already have the beginning of a research project, or workshop to share your best practices!



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<https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2013/02/17/s-is-for-student-centredness/>

Thank you