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Student-centred learning – reality or rhetoric?

Catherine Sanderson

The changing face of higher education in the 21st century, with an increase in both student numbers and diversity, presents enormous challenges for traditional approaches to curriculum delivery. Larger class sizes and inflexible learning spaces can mean that lecture formats predominate and assessment loads make timely and effective feedback problematic, potentially impacting negatively on learning. Previous research (Sanderson, 2007) suggests that students feel switched off from learning when (among other things) they are passive recipients of curricula and strategies in which they have had no say. Focus groups of students provided evidence that language, practices and processes that we take for granted in higher education are mystifying to them.

This is worrying in any institution that prides itself on being student-centred. Student-centredness is defined by Leeds Met as “putting our students at the heart of what we do and how we do it” (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2008). I wished to explore the extent to which this perception of meaning was shared by staff both at Leeds Met and throughout the higher education community. Equally importantly I wanted to know what students thought student-centredness meant.

Staff perceptions of student-centredness

Views were collected from fellow academics during workshops delivered both at Leeds Met and at international conferences. Individual definitions were initially collected and then in groups of 5–6 these definitions were discussed and a consensus arrived at. Over 500 individual definitions and around 80 group definitions were thematically analysed for commonly occurring words and phrases. Views of student-centredness fell into two themes. Quotes used are typical and highly representative.

Theme 1: Student-centredness is about the provision of an environment optimally conducive to learning

“Making the needs and desires of the student the primary influence upon course planning /delivery and theory.”

“Provides an environment where different students can learn in different ways to reach their potential.”

“The student being the most important element of the university not the needs of the institution.”

While it is hard to argue with these sentiments, they nevertheless need to be operationalised. What would such a student-centred environment look like compared with an environment less conducive to learning enhancement?

Theme 2: Student-centredness involves a focus on individual learning needs

“Individual students learning at their own pace in the ways that are most relevant to them.”

“Outcomes focused on the negotiated and contracted needs of the student.”

“Starts with student and expands to the world of work, preparing student to fit in and contribute.”

“Starting from where each individual student is at.”

Instinctively this does feel like the Holy Grail of teaching – working one on one with students, coaching them individually towards success that specifically matches their wants and needs and preferred ways of learning (Race, 2005). However, staff also expressed concerns about the constraints on making this happen imposed by increased student numbers and the structure of the academic year and curricula.

Student perceptions of student-centredness

Students from all three years of our Biomedical Sciences and Public Health courses were asked about their views of student-centredness in class. Following the same methodology as used for staff, they were asked to define student-centredness individually and then in groups. The themes that emerged were more varied, less conceptual and more pragmatic than the themes that emerged from staff responses; they were centred around course design and organisation, assessment, learning and teaching (ALT) strategies and consistency of approach of different tutors.

Theme 1: Course design and organisation

Student-centredness would mean:

“We would have timetables well in advance so we can organise PT jobs and the rooms we are in would be good ones.”

“Doing one module at a time so you can get your head around it rather than a few hours a week on four different modules spread over a whole semester.”

"More contact hours – it's hard to maintain momentum or motivation when you are only in for eight hours per week."

"Tutors should be more available for us, particularly for individual help."

"All courses should have work placements or at least work experience and give us a lot of help with getting a job."

Theme 2: Assessment, learning and teaching issues

"There should be more discussion of what we want to do in modules."

"We should do assessments that we can see the point of – it's hard to see the point of exams. If you want us to learn something tell us what it is you want us to learn and we'll do it instead of us trying to guess what to learn to pass an exam!"

"We should do lots more formative work so assessments are less stressful."

"Just sitting listening is very boring and makes you not want to come in ... we need more stuff to do."

Theme 3: Consistency of approach of different staff

"Use plainer language when you give us information or feedback."

"Be fairer – treat us all the same – some students seem to get away with anything."

"You all mark differently – How? Why? Don't!"

This exploration was in many ways encouraging. Staff were without doubt committed to and in many cases passionate about student-centredness and were able to articulate it as an almost philosophical underpinning of what they do. Students did recognise that most of their tutors had their best interests at heart and always stressed this during discussions. However, student responses showed that the application of the philosophy was not always in place.

Turning the rhetoric of student-centredness into reality is demanding. Semesterisation, modular courses, assessment and progression regulations and the sheer weight of student numbers often seem to work against allowing students to move forward in their own way and at their own pace. High levels of participation in HE make individual coaching models problematic. Additionally, the mode of learning within academia often fails to

reflect the sort of learning that happens in employment, which is essentially problem-solving.

Responsive curriculum change

Aiming for a more student-centred approach, I decided to change the delivery and the ALT strategy of a large first-year, first semester module, 'Concepts of Science and Health', delivered to 170 Public Health, Biomedical Sciences and Complementary Therapies students. The module lends itself well to student involvement as it is about the dilemmas facing scientists and healthcare professionals. Originally it was spread over a whole semester with two hours' contact time per week in a lecture theatre setting with some tutorial support. Studies indicate that the transition to HE is potentially daunting for students and the first six weeks at university have been identified as critical to student retention (Yorke, 2002).

- The module is now block delivered as a blended learning module utilising X-stream over the first four weeks of the semester on two consecutive days per week to maximise staff-student contact, with summative assessments in week 5. X-stream facilitates communication between a large group of students outside scheduled teaching sessions and engagement with the e-learning tasks is extremely high.
- The philosophical underpinning is problem-based learning (PBL) as this encourages higher levels of student involvement in the learning process (Savin Baden, 2003). Module content and assessment topics are decided in the first session by the students so they have ownership of what will be learnt. The students work in groups on PBL tasks and are given twice daily formative peer and tutor feedback on how they are approaching those tasks. The tutor feedback is delivered verbally in class but also via written and verbal feedback on X-stream within 24 hours of postings. The assessment criteria for the summative assessments are decided by the students after peer review of previous reports (Rust et al, 2003).
- All summative work is self-, peer- and tutor-assessed. Self- and peer-assessment are facilitated through tutor dialogue forms (Race, 2007) and the student-derived assessment criteria mark sheet (Orsmond et al, 2000).

Students are given feedback on the extent to which their assessment matches or differs from the tutor assessment. Students are involved in almost every aspect of the ALT strategy of this module.

- A range of outcomes were monitored, including attendance, engagement in group work, engagement in class discussion, and functionality of groups. All showed significant improvement compared with the previous mode of delivery. The pass rate increased from 81% to 96% and the average pass mark from 48% to 56%. Student evaluations were also very positive.

A second group assignment introduced during this current academic year is the creation of a poster outlining a future vision – a product, technology, business venture, or change of approach – that students think will be dominant in 30 years' time. Student views on student-centredness consistently highlight the need for their courses to enhance their employability. This summative assessment serves to develop the creative, innovative and enterprise skills that students will need in their future work.

Overall the module incorporates many elements of student-centredness as articulated by both staff and students. Further research will investigate whether the student views are shared across other Faculties.

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