The 6 Signs of a Student-Centered Classroom

Imagine walking into a **student-centered classroom**. What do you see? What do you hear? Where is the teacher standing? What are the students doing?

It's been over 100 years since John dewey began advocating for what we would now call *student-centered learning (SCL)*. Since then, countless educators, researchers, and professional development providers have championed the *student-centered classroom*.

But just how *student-centered* are today's classrooms? Compared to schools of 100 years ago, today's classrooms are *very* student-centered.

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But though progress has made, most schools still rely heavily on *teacher-centered learning models.* The teacher decides what and how students will learn. She does most of the talking during a lesson. And when a student *does* speak, the teacher decides whether or not their answer was correct.

The challenge in making classes *more student-centered,* is that there are so many definitions of student-centered learning.

In some schools, *SCL* means that students sit at tables instead of desks. At others, it refers to differentiated instruction. In the most progressive schools, a classroom is only considered student-centered if students *create their own assignments* and *grade their own work*.

Now all of these are *great* examples of student-centered learning. But examples are not definitions.

And if you want to figure out *just how student-centered* your classroom is, we'll need a shared definition.

"You Don't Think Our Class Is Student Centered?"

During my years as a classroom teacher, I assumed student-centered learning was pretty *self-explanatory*.

But as soon as I moved into instructional coaching, I learned otherwise. During one of my first coaching assignments, at a middle school in Harlem, a pair of teachers asked me to observe a lesson and give them feedback. As the class started, one teacher stood by the door and the other stood in the back. The students walked silently to their desks, which were in rows, and sat down to a ten-page packet.

A loud, sharp voice announced, "Open your packets to page 1!"

The teachers walked up and down the rows to ensure everyone was on the right page. One teacher read from the textbook. “The coordinate plane consists of two axes. The x-axis is horizontal. The y-axis is vertical.”

Then, a cold-call. “Jonathan, which axis is horizontal?”
Jonathan: “The x-axis.”

“Good.”

They continued up and down the aisles throughout the period. If anyone talked, their name was announced, and they were given a warning. (Whatever the consequence was, it seemed to be effective).

After the direct instruction, students worked silently and independently. Finally, the teachers collected the packets and dismissed the class.

When we met to debrief, I commended the pair for their organization and classroom management. But I wanted to know if they’d consider planning planning and co-teaching “a *student centered lesson*.”

They looked at me in shock, *“You don’t think our classroom is student-centered?”*

I wasn’t sure what to say. It felt like we were speaking different languages. I had just witnessed the least student-centered classroom I’d ever seen. But to them, a student-centered classroom had nothing to do with differentiation, collaboration or ownership. It meant *caring about their students*. And they deeply believed that their “tough love” approach was the best they could do for their students.

This experience taught me two important lessons. First, as an instructional coach, I should never make suggestions without first listening to a teacher’s thoughts, perspectives, and goals.

Second, I realized that I needed a way to clearly and concisely define and describe a student-centered classroom.

The Teacher-Centered Classroom

Defining a student-centered classroom begins by defining the traditional model of education*:* the *teacher-centered classroom*.

It's entirely possible for an effective and caring teacher to rely on a teacher-centered model. Caring for our students is necessary, but not sufficient, for cultivating a *student-centered classroom*.

Simply put, in a teacher-centered classroom, the teacher is at the center of the learning:

- Information flows from teacher to students
- Students look to the teacher to make decisions
- Students pay more attention to the teacher than each other
- The teacher does most of the talking
- The teacher sets the rules and the goals

When I was a student, I found it hard to stay focused and motivated in this type of classroom. Everyone was expected to learn the same content at the same time. Our job was to follow directions, get the right answers, and do our homework.

When I daydreamed or didn't get my work done, it was because I wasn't focused or driven enough. Eventually, this manifested as an aversion to school work. I figured out the minimum necessary to get the grades I wanted, and did that.

It made perfect sense – the teacher *owned the learning*. They told me what needed to be done, and rated me on how well I did it. So as long as they rated me favorably, it would be silly to do more.

But I wasn't lazy. I worked really hard at a lot of things. My interests were an odd mix: computers, acting, and classic rock. I rushed through most of my school work to put my energy into these hobbies.

Student-Centered Learning Begins with a Mindset

My favorite teachers helped me to harness my passions and channel them into my school work. They made learning feel like a collaborative effort. And always found ways to challenge us and to make their content more interesting.

Photo by CDC on Unsplash

Mr. Myslik loved to sit back and listen as his students took over a discussion about *Walden* or *The Great Gatsby*. And in Mr. Faubert's German class, we spent a month translating and dubbing an entire *Simpsons* episode. I still remember what "*abgelaufene Medizin"* means, only because I had to say it in Homer's voice.

The challenge in *spotting a student-centered classroom* is that there's no single strategy or resource that makes learning student-centered. You can't just buy a *student-centered textbook* or *student-centered software*. It's a way of *thinking about education,* and there are a thousand ways to do it right.

But the definition of a student-centered classroom is right in the name. Instead of focusing on the teacher or the curriculum, the focus is on the students. What do they want to learn? What do they need to succeed?

Students have control over what they learn and how they learn it. They can work together to create the class rules. And when teachers provide feedback, it's to support learning. Not just to rate and sort students.

Of course, no classroom is *entirely* student-centered. If students showed up to my math class and decided we were doing pottery that day, I could turn teacher-centered pretty darn quick. Every class exists somewhere on the spectrum. But for most of us, a shift to the student-centered side would be beneficial.

6 Signs of a Student-Centered Classroom

Although student-centered learning isn't a specific teaching strategy, there are several signs that indicate a student-centered classroom. Whether you're a teacher, administrator, or coach, these signs can be valuable tools for reflection and goal-setting.

Imagine you were watching your classroom from the outside, how many of these signs would you see? If you're a coach or a school leader, think about how this list could help guide your professional growth conversations?

The Six Signs of a Student-Centered Classroom

1. Active Learning

One of the most important psychological discoveries of all time is this: *learning is more than the* ***accumulation of facts***.

One of our earliest theories of learning came from Plato. He believed that humans are born knowing all we would ever know. What we call *learning* was really just *reminding* us of what our souls knew before birth.

Two millennia later, John Locke proposed the exact opposite: we're born only with *mental powers*, which allow us to learn new things. But our mind starts as a blank slate (tabula rasa).

It wasn't until the 1920's that Jean Piaget developed a modern theory of learning. Constructivism describes learning as a process of *actively constructing understanding,* which builds upon our existing beliefs and knowledge.

His theory has been repeatedly supported by research. It's not that active learning is *just better*. If our brain isn't actively processing and storing knowledge, **we're not learning *at all***.

This means that the best learning experiences are *interactive.* These hands-on lessons allow students to move around and use multiple senses. They require students to engage, discuss, draw, build, and collaborate. And they support deeper understanding, better retention, and increased skill fluency. The first step towards active learning is limiting teacher talk. Teachers who rely mostly on lectures can start by calling on students more. The next step is to guide students into more authentic dialog with one another.

Eventually this can lead to student-led discussions and other forms of inquiry-based learning.

2. Collaboration

Collaboration is another hallmark of a student-centered classroom. In teacher-centered classrooms, every learning event must pass through the teacher.

This creates a bottleneck, with only a few students actively engaged at a time. In a typical 40 minute period, the teacher talks more than half the time. This leaves each student with an average of *less than a minute of talk time* per class. When one student has a question, the whole class waits, and listens to the teacher's response. If they already know the answer, it's over their head, or if they're just sitting there daydreaming, the rest of the class is not doing any learning during the exchange.

I remember coaching a teacher who actually *made the bottleneck effect visible*. She taught using the *I Do, We Do, You Do* model. Class began with a worked example problem on the board, then, the class would do a practice problem together.

Next, students worked independently. And those who had questions could come to her desk for help. Within minutes, the whole class would be lined up, waiting with their question. This routine made her feel helpful, valued, and

respected. But her students spent most of class standing on line instead of learning.

Letting students collaborate is more efficient, and more effective. They can get instant feedback from peers, and develop social-emotional skills. There is even evidence that students learn more easily when peers explain something to them than when a teacher does.

Turn and talk is a simple way to introduce collaboration into a traditional lesson. For more sophisticated collaborative models, rubrics and group work protocols can be helpful. It's important to recognize that collaboration is a learned skill. So don't expect students to get it on the first day, especially if they're used to lecture-based instruction.

3. Differentiation

Differentiation literally means *to make different*. It's a pretty broad term, but generally refers to any changes we make to meet a student's individual needs.

Adapted from Tomlinson & Maker (1982)

More specifically, there are four ways we can differentiate, according to Tomlinson and Maker (1982).

- Content: what students learn
- Process: how they learn
- Product: how we measure the learning
- Environment: where students learn

Most differentiation in schools takes the form of scaffolding: providing extra support (tutoring, small group instruction) when students struggle. While scaffolding is important, it's not always enough.

If a student reads on grade level, but struggles with a single assignment, it makes sense to reteach with a different approach. But if a student is well above or below grade level, we need to *differentiate by content*.

Expecting learners with diverse needs and skills to achieve the same outcomes often leads to **overscaffolding**. This is when we unintentionally help students *appear* successful, even when they haven't mastered a standard. To truly meet students needs, educators need to know all four ways to differentiate, and choose the one that each situation calls for.

One limitation of differentiation is that it assumes that we plan for the *average student* and then "make things different" for everyone else. Newer models, like the *Universal Design for Learning* are based on the idea that *there is no **average student*.** Instead, *UDL* takes learning differences into account from the start, and designs flexible learning activities that allow every learner to be challenged and supported.

Our model, *The Three Bridges Design for Learning* takes a similar approach. Rather than assuming that one learning model can meet all learning needs, 3 Bridges uses a combination of content coverage, adaptive learning, and inquiry-based learning. Each model supports distinct learning objectives. By combining all three, educuators can balance the need for *standards-based instruction* with *individual growth, creative problem-solving,* and *social-emotional learning.*

4. Social-Emotional Learning

Another feature of a student-centered classroom is an emphasis on ***social-emotional learning (SEL).***

Student-centered classrooms recognize that students learn more than the three R's in school. To be prepared for life *outside of school*, students need communication skills, self-control, self-awareness, and so on.

Some schools use an *explicit* approach to teaching *SEL*. This involves a social-emotional curriculum, and separate class times dedicated to *SEL* instruction.

While this approach can be helpful, it can also send the message that social-emotional learning is *separate from* academic learning. In reality, *social-emotional learning* supports student success in all classes. And all classes play a role in supporting SEL competencies.

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In student-centered classrooms, students develop their social-emotional skills by engaging in *active learning*. Planning a long-term project, working in teams, and giving oral presentations all support social-emotional learning. This approach makes efficient use of instructional time, as students acquire content knowledge *at the same time* they are developing social-emotional skills.

5. Voice and Choice

Imagine an internet with one website, or a TV with one channel. This is what it can feel like for students, as they march from class to class all day, listening to lectures and following directions. When students have *no control over their learning experiences*, it's natural for them to feel bored and disengaged. Giving students choice and voice increases student engagement, which means increased learning.

One way to magnify student voice is through surveys. Ask students how they enjoyed a unit, or what they want to learn in your class. You won't be able to give them everything they want. But even asking their opinion can help them feel more invested.

And there are plenty of ways to increase student choice without compromising standards. For example, I have students work in teams to complete story analysis organizers on a story of their choice. They develop the same standards-based literacy skills (not to mention *SEL skills)*, but are able to incorporate their interests.

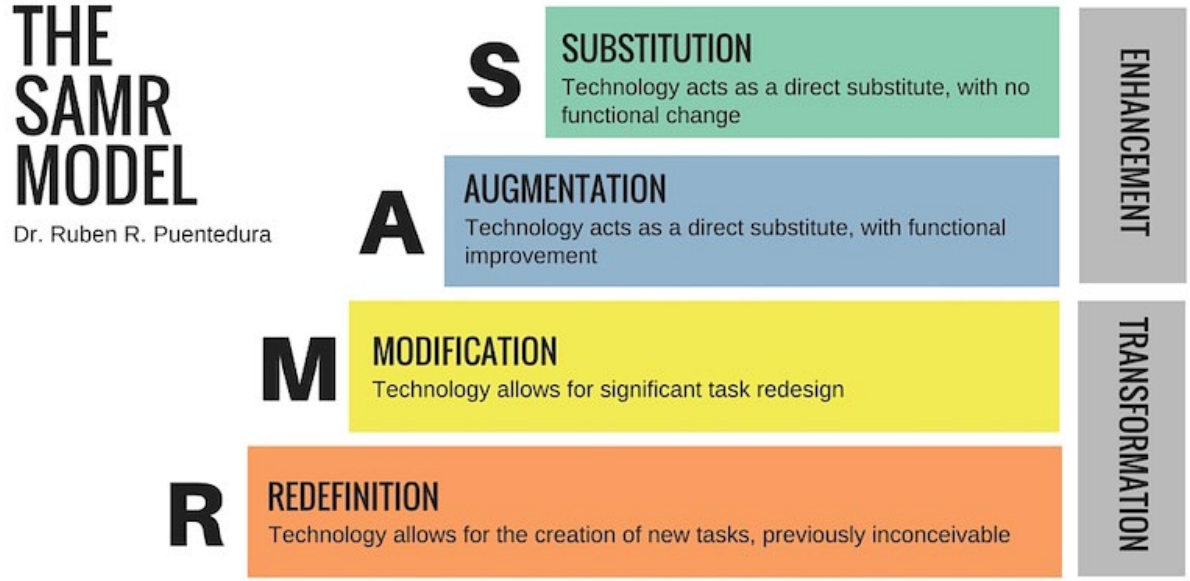
Another way to increase choice is with student goal-setting. Give students a list of standards and let them determine how they will demonstrate mastery. Or provide a list of assignments from a unit, and let them create their own deadlines.

6. Technology Integration

Technology, used effectively, can be a powerful student-centered learning tool.

Classroom technology can allow students to work together on collaborative documents. Or demonstrate their understanding through videos and presentations. Adaptive learning platforms can allow us to differentiate in ways previously unimaginable. Effective technology use can simply just save time, freeing teachers to plan more creative and engaging lessons.

But technology integration should not be seen as an end in itself. I remember a lot of fuss around *interactive digital whiteboards* when they first came out. They always struck me as a cross between a whiteboard and a television. *SMART Boards* (and others like them) were twice as hard to write on. And what I wrote looked half as good as it did with dry erase markers. Before I got an interactive whiteboard, my room was already covered with dry erase boards. I regularly had my whole class at the wall, sharing and discussing their work. But the *digital whiteboards*, which were supposed to make my classroom more interactive, could only accommodate one student at a time. This type of technology integration simply adds bells and whistles to *teacher-centered instruction*. According to the *SAMR* model, it's a form of *substitution*: when technology replaces an analog tool, but with little or no functional improvement.



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Augmentation is when technology uses the same instructional model, but makes things more efficient or effective. *Modification* changes the learning model, but keeps the same objectives or standards. And *Redefinition* is when technology allows students to learn skills that didn't exist without technology, such as coding or web design.

By looking at EdTech through the SAMR lens, we can ensure we are using technology to achieve a purpose, rather than using tech for tech's sake.

Cultivating a Student-Centered Classroom

It's easy to make any classroom more student-centered. The first step is to pause before making *any decision*. Ask yourself, "How will this benefit my students."

Whether you're arranging furniture, or planning a lesson, this simple question will help you to cultivate a student-centered mindset.

You can also use the ***six signs of a student-centered classroom*** as a guide. List all the ways you support of each *SCL* indicator. Then, make a list of one way you can improve in each area.

It's also important to have the right support and the right resources. You can also find student-centered resources for any subject area in our online store. We have interactive math lessons, student goal-setting activities, and more. You can also level up you *student-centered* teaching skills in our online workshops. Choose from topics like student-centered classroom management, inquiry-based math, and more.

Or simply stay connected with the latest in student-centered learning, by joining our Facebook community and subscribing to our free weekly newsletter.

Whatever approach you take, try to make one small change a week. That way you can support your students, adjust as you learn, and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

About the Author

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