THE LEARNER-CENTERED CURRICULUM

Design AND Implementation

Roxanne Cullen • Michael Harris
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FOREWORD BY **MARYELLEN WEIMER**

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We dedicate this book to our families.

Roxanne Cullen dedicates this book to her husband, John.

*Michael Harris dedicates this book to his wife, Tali, and his sons,
Ronen, Asaf, and Amit.*

*Reinhold R. Hill dedicates this book to his spouse, Nell Rose,
and to his three daughters, Zaida, Anja, and Kira.*

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Foreword

I am frequently asked in learner-centered teaching workshops whether one learner-centered course is enough to really make a difference in how students learn. The question is motivated by the fact that many courses at many institutions are still not learner-centered but continue to be teacher-centered and focused on content transmission. The questioner's sense is that even if a student has a different kind of learning experience in one course, that it won't be enough to make a significant difference and so maybe what's needed to make a course learner-centered is just wasted effort. Surprisingly, some research evidence is emerging that one learner-centered course early in the curriculum *can* make a difference (Derting & Ebert-May, 2010). Obviously, two courses will make more difference than one, a series would increase the impact still further, and a whole curriculum would be ideal.

The Learner-Centered Curriculum: Design and Implementation describes that ideal. It proposes how a learner-centered curriculum can be created, includes examples that illustrate what it might look like, and tackles the tough issues that surround curricular change. It's an inspiring book. Learner-centered curricula focus on the development of sophisticated learning skills. They don't just cover content but use what is known within a field to develop a strong knowledge base and to build the learning skills today's students will need for the lifetime of learning that awaits them personally

and professionally. They are curricula that integrate knowledge across disciplines and topics. They combine the acquisition and application of knowledge with out-of-class experiences that give students opportunities to use what they are learning. They don't look like traditional curricula, and that's an issue.

Curricular change is never easy. For the most part, classroom are still teachers' castles. Behind their closed doors, they decide both what is taught and how it is taught. Sometimes well-intentioned academic leaders try to foist curricular revision on faculty. They require the submission and approval of course plans consistent with the new curricular goals and objectives. But then faculty return to their classrooms and pretty much teach the course as they've always taught it. Faculty have to want to change, and what makes this book more than just inspiring are the practical suggestions it offers for implementing these innovative curricula. The authors are (or have been) faculty members. They know how faculty members think about course design and curricular change. They offer approaches, arguments, and ideas that respond to faculty resistance to learner-centered approaches specifically and curricular change more generally.

This book can be profitably read by a variety of those in the higher education community. It can be read by that individual faculty member committed to learner-centered course goals who worries that one learner-centered course experience is not enough and wants there to be more. It can be read by curricular committee chairs and members. If a committee has been charged with curricular revision or even the possibility of it, this would be an excellent book for group discussion. It's a great book for department chairs. Learner-centered courses can be developed incrementally. Perhaps, given the politics of the institution or department, the best place to start is with two or three strategically positioned courses within a degree program. They can be taught by faculty committed to learner-centered goals, and this book discusses how those courses can be assessed and how that data can be used to motivate more

curricular change. And certainly this is a book for academic leaders who aspire to change the curriculum at their institution. It makes compelling arguments as to why curricula need to be more learner-centered, and offers examples of those curricula and advice on setting the curricular change agenda.

The Learner-Centered Curriculum follows *Leading the Learner-Centered Campus: An Administrator's Framework for Improving Student Learning Outcomes*, written by Michael Harris and Roxanne Cullen. That book explores learner-centered leadership, proposing a leadership model based on the same learner-centered principles used with students and in classrooms. That kind of leadership sets the conditions for the curricular change described in this book. The two books are really companion works that move interests in learner-centered teaching from individual classrooms to institutions. It's common for institutions to claim they are learner- or learning-centered. These books make clear how that claim must be supported with policies, practices, and curricula that make learning the true centerpiece of an institution.

I also found *The Learner-Centered Curriculum* intriguing because it positions curricular change within a larger context. It isn't just about what is taught or even about how it's taught. It's also about where it's taught—what the classrooms look like, how technology should support learning goals, and how spaces around campus can be created so as to enhance the learning mission of the institution. Some of the richest examples are those derived from the authors' own experiences on their campus. They write about those with candor and insight.

Most of my work has been at the individual classroom level, and that's the focus of much of the literature on learner-centered teaching. Although that may be the easiest and most sensible place to begin, it is not the level at which significant change is accomplished. Learner-centered ideas have been widely promoted in the literature since Barr and Tagg's seminal article (1995). Unfortunately though, since then it has been mostly about trying

to change higher education classroom by classroom. It's time to pick up the pace. Students deserve more than an occasional learner-centered experience. They should be able to participate in whole programs where how they are learning is just as important as what they learn. This book gives that conversation form and substance.

Maryellen Weimer

Preface

A few years ago, when the three of us were all working at the same institution, we took part in a classroom renovation project with the goal of making the classrooms more inviting and comfortable for students. With the aid of a design firm, we transformed sterile-looking, institutional white classrooms into colorful, technologically current learning spaces, with modern carpet design and state-of-the-art moveable furniture. Although this was a huge improvement over the rooms we had, we were limited by the existing spaces, and we could not reduce the number of seats in any classroom simply because of class sizes and increasing demand. The problem was that the most flexible furniture design in the world cannot be used to its true effect if confined in rooms that are too small. So, in many instances, our lovely folding tables with casters remain in their locked positions facing the front of the room.

We begin with this story because it serves as an analogy for the point we want to make about curriculum. Across the country, faculty are innovating and applying learner-centered practices in their classrooms. Too often, though, their courses are wedged into curricula that are not conducive to their innovations. Like a classroom that is too small for the specially designed furniture, the curricular model undermines the intent and restricts faculty members' ability to fully embrace learner-centered practices to the extent they might imagine. A second point is that the learning experience at an institution does not change if students take one or

two learner-centered courses. If an institution is to be truly learner-centered, all processes and practices need to be learner-centered, and the curriculum is no exception.

In this book, we will consider ways to break down the walls that confine our imagination and, as in the case of physical spaces, redesign curricular spaces to support and enhance learner-centered teaching. We will make the case that for many existing programs, the curriculum design is predicated on elements of a paradigm that is contrary to what we are trying to achieve through learner-centered pedagogy.

Purpose

Many fine books on curriculum design already exist, and we reference many of them. We aspire to help faculty members and administrators think about curriculum in a new, learner-centered way. We have the same background as many of you. We are not instructional designers by training; we do, however, have extensive experience with curriculum revision from the faculty member's and administrator's perspectives. By exposing habitual ways of approaching curriculum, curriculum planners will become more intentional in their thinking and be able to develop a new approach that is more flexible and aligned with learner-centered pedagogy. Although we do offer suggestions and recommendations, our main agenda is to provoke thinking about how curriculum might be designed differently. In the end, our goal is to share our insights with those interested in joining us on our exploration of innovative, learner-centered curricula that prepare students, and the rest of us, for twenty-first-century teaching, learning, and careers.

Audience

It may be a quirk of English majors and avid readers, but those of us who pay attention to the books on people's bookshelves or to the books others are reading on a bus or park bench also make

judgments about people based on those selections. If you are caught reading this book, we hope we know what people will think about you. At least we know what *we* think about you.

You are reading this book because you care about student learning. You may be frustrated that change in higher education takes so long, or you may be an agent of change trying to be innovative and creative in a system that often fails to accommodate your ideas. You see how rapidly the world is changing, and you want to make your students' educational experience relevant and current. You believe in learner-centered practices, and you want to apply them in new ways throughout your institution. You might be a faculty member interested in curriculum and desirous to make degree programs at your institution more learner-centered, or you might be a faculty developer whose job it is to provide others with curriculum design ideas. You might be a department chair or dean who would like to support curricular change in your unit, or you might be a provost or president who is trying to push forward the learner-centered agenda at the institutional level. Regardless of your role within the institution, you are open to new ideas and are looking for ways to improve the educational experience of your students, with the result being graduates who are prepared for the challenges we know they are going to face. We are writing this book to you and for you.

Structure

Because our aim is to foster intentional thinking about curricula, the first five chapters are organized around questions, specifically: *Why redesign curricula? How did we get to this point? What would a learner-centered design look like? How do we implement such a design? Where are they doing it already?* After explaining our thinking about these questions, we offer technical advice on how the strategic use of assessment, technology, and physical spaces can support a shift toward a learner-centered curriculum design.

In Chapter One, we reference the numerous calls for higher education to produce graduates who are creative, autonomous learners. We posit that creativity and learner autonomy can indeed be taught and that many of the practices we know as learner-centered pedagogy are consistent with the strategies used to develop creativity and autonomy.

In Chapter Two, we present a history of curriculum development and illustrate the ways in which this traditional design is based on an instructional paradigm derived from a mechanistic view of learning. We explore some underlying accepted assumptions about curriculum design, namely that curriculum is linear in design, that learning takes place the same way for all individuals, that time is an important factor in determining learning, that error is negative, and that knowledge is an entity to be owned and controlled.

In Chapter Three, we present a framework for curriculum design based on learner-centered principles. Using Doll's postmodern theory of curriculum as an organizing principle, we examine each of the assumptions presented in Chapter Two and offer learner-centered alternatives.

In Chapter Four, we explore implementation issues. We begin with a consideration of overarching principles related to curriculum implementation, and then we offer what we refer to as *What if?* conversations, intended to provide leaders with some specific questions to ask and consider in order to keep the conversation focused on new ways of conceiving curriculum and seeing the process from a learner-centered perspective.

Chapter Five provides examples of curricula that demonstrate the principles presented in Chapter Three. Using a rubric we developed as an instrument to gauge the degree of learner-centeredness in the design, we look at several curricula that illustrate varying degrees of learner-centeredness in their design and conclude the chapter with a hypothetical example of the revision of an existing program.

Throughout the book, we emphasize the need for assessment, noting specifically that both formative and summative assessments are key features of learner-centered pedagogy and that assessment is an effective driver of change. For that reason, we have devoted Chapter Six to assessment practices and offer a wide variety of options both for individual classroom practice and for programmatic assessment.

Chapter Seven is devoted to technology and the many new tools available to educators that can support learner-centered practices and foster autonomous learning. We make the point in Chapter Five that curriculum designs will necessarily vary in degree of learner-centeredness. In this chapter, we show how technology, particularly online learning environments, can assist in removing some of the obstacles to achieving a learner-centered design.

Learner-centered classroom pedagogy and curricula require physical spaces that are amenable to collaboration and engagement, so in Chapter Eight, we explore the importance of physical spaces in relation to learner-centered curricular design. We also recognize that tying renovation to curricular implementation can foster motivation to innovate, resulting in a physical manifestation of learner-centered principles.

Acknowledgments

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About the Authors

Roxanne Cullen is a professor of English at Ferris State University (FSU) and coordinator of the bachelor of integrative studies degree program. In her tenure at FSU she has also served as Writing Center director, administrative head of the Department of Languages and Literature, interim associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and assistant and associate vice president for academic affairs. In addition to her administrative service, Cullen is a recipient of the university's Distinguished Teaching Award. She received her PhD in English from Bowling Green State University and her BA in English from SUNY Geneseo. In 2010, she coauthored *Leading the Learner-Centered Campus* with Michael Harris.

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The Learner-Centered Curriculum

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Why Redesign Curriculum?

Igor Pušenjak, age thirty-four, was placed fourteenth on *Fast Company*'s 2010 list of the one hundred most creative people. He and his brother designed Doodle Jump, the most popular application for the iPhone. The brothers' $100 investment, coupled with tenacity in the face of five previous failures, led to the game's selling more than four million copies by May 2010. On his Web site, Pušenjak describes himself as a "photographer, multimedia artist, designer, technologist, pilot, and an avid sailor," a modern renaissance man. Pušenjak's place on the *Fast Company* list points to the increasing importance of creativity and adaptability to changing work opportunities.

How does this story relate to curriculum design? Lattuca and Stark (2009) believe that looking at curricular change over time reveals that universities are reactive to societal pressures—that curriculum is a reflection, in fact, of its sociocultural context. We believe the time is right for major change in the design of curriculum because of the impact of current social reality and because of the research on learning that can inform the process. Furthermore, the success story of the Pušenjak brothers illustrates two recurring themes that directly impact curriculum design. First, the brothers were not trained in the area of their success; they integrated multiple talents and knowledge bases. Second, they were resilient in the face of failure and no doubt learned from their failures, which eventually led to their success with Doodle Jump.

In this chapter, we will offer our answer to the question, *Why do we need to redesign our curricula?* Beginning with an exploration of the current and future need for employees who are creative, independent learners, we will then consider how the traditional view of curriculum as a vehicle for transmitting knowledge is counterproductive with regard to the goal of developing graduates with those qualities. Next, we present documentation that supports the belief that creativity and adaptability can be taught. We answer the "Why redesign curricula?" question by demonstrating how realigning traditional curriculum with a learner-centered paradigm has the potential to create learning environments that are conducive to supporting independent learning and creativity.

The Call for Creativity and Adaptability

The societal need for autonomous learners who adapt quickly to new situations, who are engaged in lifelong learning, and who are flexible and innovative in their approach to problem solving is well documented (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2007). A national survey conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the American Association of College and Universities asked employers to rate new hires in the skills that are generally agreed on to represent the abilities necessary to succeed in the twenty-first-century workforce. The results looked like a bell curve: not many A's or F's, mostly mediocre. Although these results may indicate that the United States is not in the dire circumstances that some have claimed previously, they do show that employers are not completely satisfied either. The results of this survey as well as the findings of other business and industry studies and independent educational research teams all indicate that higher education needs to do a better job of preparing students.

In its publication *College Learning for the New Global Century*, the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (2007) outlines four broad areas in which all students