

How to Create a Learning-Centered ESL Program

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Abstract

This paper reviews the major features of learning-centered community colleges that offer educational programs and experiences for learners, based on individual need. By citing some exemplary learning colleges, the author examines the concepts and ideas of learning-centered colleges in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. An emphasis is given to the environment, learning goals, performance and feedback, and rubrics as successful learning tools in teaching ESL in the colleges. ESL instructors are encouraged to transform the learning culture from teacher centered to student centered environments.

Key words: learning-centered College; English as a second language; teacher-centered approach; community college

What is a Learning College?

The learning college puts students' learning first. The learning college offers educational programs and experiences available for learners based on individual need. Whatever is done in the learning college is done for learners. The learning college explores the full potential of learners, and provides them with support systems to meet their goals. The model is based on the assumption that educational experiences are designed for the convenience of learners rather than for the convenience of institutions and their staff. Learning is the mission, the purpose, and the core value of learning centered organizations. Every policy, program, and practice is designed to support and create improved and expanded learning for students (O'Banion, 1997 a, Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Boggs (1999, p. 9) identified four tenets of the learning paradigm that support a learning centered college concept:

- The mission of colleges and universities should be student learning rather than teaching or instruction.
- Institutions should accept responsibility for student learning.
- Supporting and promoting student learning should be everyone's job and should guide institutional decisions.
- Institutions should judge their effectiveness and be evaluated on student learning outcomes rather than on resources or processes.

Every single activity, program or decision carried out in a learning college is focused on learning. O'Banion (1997 b) suggested asking questions to improve and expand student learning.

He wanted to make sure that every program is related to student learning. Does the purchase of these five new computers improve and expand student learning? Does the employment of these three new part-time faculties improve and expand student learning?

This paper reviews the major features of learning-centered community colleges. By citing some exemplary learning community colleges, I would like to apply the concepts and ideas of learning-centered colleges in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and focus the concepts of environment, goals, performance and feedback, and rubrics as successful learning tools in teaching ESL in the colleges.

Advantages of Learner-Centered Teaching

Why should instructors use learner-centered approaches in their teaching? What are the advantages of this model in higher education? Scholars have focused on the benefits of the learning-centered approach in terms of content, role, responsibility, assessment and power. American Psychological Association report (APA, 1997) identified fourteen learner centered principles. Alexander and Murphy (2000) summarized these fourteen principles into the following five domains:

a) The knowledge base- Learners in this model participate in several learning activities. Each decision and activity would ask what students learn and how they learn. Learning is the mantra.

b) Strategic pressing and executive control- Learners as a part of the team became responsible and committed. The active involvement itself helps learners to work on personal strategic plans.

c) Motivation and affect- Learning- based programs and activities increase students' motivation, commitment and responsibility, and help achieve the common goals.

d) Development and individual differences- Learners from diverse learning backgrounds, skills, experiences, and individual preferences work in collaboration. Learning-based programs help them strengthen skills and hands-on experiences.

e) Situation or context- Learning process depends on various factors such as classroom environment, learning pedagogies, instructors, classroom materials and activities. Some learners actively participate in the interaction and learn fast whereas some take a longer time to produce the outcomes.

How to Create a Learning-Centered Classroom?

Community colleges should create learning communities in which learners can engage in more interaction as a process of learning. Tagg (2003) focused on the learning-centered model in community colleges through effective courses and programs for students. Learning settings such as the classroom should be friendly because "stressful school environments reduce students' ability to learn" (Sylvester, 1994, p.65). The use of technology in the learning process is one example of effectively engaging students. Technology helps support students in completing their course work. It also de-centers traditional teaching by facilitating students in active learning in writing-intensive courses (Bender, 2003).

Combs (1976), Savoie and Hughes (1994), and Marzano (1992) described the following learning-centered classroom situations:

- The classroom must provide opportunities for involvement, interaction and socialization to explore meaning.
- Students should be given frequent opportunities to confront new information and experiences as a process of personal discovery.

- Learners should engage in collaborative problem-solving that relates to real world activities.

The instructor must reflect on how learning occurs. Learning-centered models involve a process in which learners undergo engagement, inquiry, reflection and presentation of findings (Savorie & Hughes, 1994).

Concepts and Examples of Learning-Centered Models in

English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs

This section examines how the concepts and models of learning oriented materials and activities are used in the ESL program. There are limited references of learner-based ESL programs in the literature, case studies, and journal articles, and web tours. I would like to focus on environment and management of materials to cultivate the ESL learning culture. Students in ESL programs come from various multicultural and multiethnic backgrounds. If the learners are given the opportunities to be responsible for their learning according to their needs and choices, the learning would be more fruitful and students would be responsible for their own learning.

Learning-centered ESL Programs

ESL programs in the institutions of higher education are narrowly viewed in terms of pedagogies, programs, and resources and monitoring. A large number of students who are immigrants, refugees, undocumented, and international enroll in ESL programs but the college or the university system does not have extensive support for these students. Rather the colleges do not reframe the curriculum, programs and the activities to respond to the specific needs of ESL students (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Barrett, Bower and Donovan (2007) found 84% of instructors were not using learning-centered approaches in Florida's twenty-eight community colleges. Sometimes, learners are not even given opportunities to engage in language speaking

communities. In colleges, ESL programs are considered as either the pre-requisites of course work or the workforce language. ESL is not perceived as lifelong learning for those second language speakers. There are not conceptual frameworks to define ESL credits. There is not enough professional development to train ESL instructors and improve classroom pedagogies (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). In this sense, there is a high need of learning-centered ESL programs in each college and university.

A Learning-Centered ESL Classroom

In ESL learning, classroom setting plays a crucial role in addressing issues of diverse students. Classroom environment has a great impact on learning. Students learn better when they are in brain-friendly classrooms. Students feel actively engaged and motivated if they are in an open classroom setting. The more materials that are displayed in the class, the better the classroom outcomes. One remarkable example of the learning-centered classroom is seen in the English as Second Language teaching classroom at Tompkins Cortland Community College in New York. The language class is structured in such a way that the physical environment stimulates learning emotionally, socially and physically. Wide windows, circular furniture and live plants in the classroom improve the physical aspect of the ESL classroom (“Dialogue on Learning”, n.d.).

Student/Faculty Interactions in the Learning Model

There is not enough interaction between students and faculty on learning models in ESL departments. Instructors should be familiar with updated pedagogies concerning teaching diverse ESL students. Interaction, meetings, seminars and peer teaching would strengthen the concept of learning-centered model in colleges. When teachers are friendly, cooperative and collaborative in their teaching, they can seek innovative and effective ways to apply learning based principles in their classes. ESL students are complicated in nature unlike traditional students, a fact that has

been ignored for the most part (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). ESL students consist of diverse linguistics, social and cultural backgrounds. They are not familiar with college culture, and need more time to get exposed to their friends and teachers.

To comprehend such diverse students, the colleges should provide interactive trainings to the teachers and staff. Some colleges offer workshops and trainings to their faculty to strengthen their teaching and learning skills in the cross cultural settings. The colleges should provide syllabi workshop to train the ESL faculty members in the ESL department. Prince George's Community College has launched a program called "PGCC Faculty Members Model for Excellence" to improve courses and revise curricula in their academic divisions and departments ("PGCC faculty," n.d.). The faculty participated in workshops, conferences, read journals on teaching, used appropriate technology to foster student success. Iowa State University has offered learning-centered syllabi workshop for the faculty to develop syllabi based on learners' needs and experiences ("Learning-centered syllabi." n.d.).

Learning Technology in ESL Classroom

The ESL classroom without technology is incomplete. Internet and computers should be the cornerstones in ESL learning programs. Technology based activities help motivate learners and increase critical thinking. In ESL courses, learners actively participate in classroom learning when they are asked to use software applications for listening, reading, writing and speaking activities (Svinivki & McKeachie, 2011). For example, students can develop sound files by using multimedia software, and that can facilitate communication between the instructor and students or among students themselves. Various internet websites and online learning forums create a community of collaborative work for both teachers and students. More than 90 million young people use digital media for language learning activities (Philip, 2007). ESL students' success

rate is higher in the colleges where instructors have used innovative learning technology in their classrooms (Girardi, 2005). Today, language immersion and user-friendly translation programs have become popular in language teaching activities.

There should be an appropriate use of technology to address students who are born abroad and come to the U.S. in their childhood or students with diverse backgrounds. Software based-learning helps these students work on their fossilized language errors and learn grammatical aspects of a new language. As an example, students in the National Learning Infrastructure Initiatives (NLII) Project at Arizona State University have used audio, video, simulation and technology-based presentations in the classroom as a part of the learning activities to help these special students ("Mapping the learning space" n.d.).

Syllabus and Rubrics as Learner-Centered Tools

The ESL syllabus should include materials related to learners' background, nationality, work place, language, and culture. Lessons that integrate multiple areas related to the student would increase student participation and create fruitful learning environments. Syllabi that include integrated activities place the course emphasis back on the learner.

Courses with quality syllabi and useful rubrics support student learning. Because of poorly designed courses, students do not become interested in learning, and are more likely not to be retained. Sengupta and Jepsen (2006) wrote that 52% of ESL students in California's community college do not return for a second semester. Rubrics in ESL courses should be clearly written in order to provide feedback to the learner to promote student growth. King's college and Inver Hill College, for example, have focused on rubrics in their ESL curricula. Many students do not get helpful feedback that they can use to improve their language skills (Mellow & Heelan, 2008).

Learning Communities for ESL Students: Theory into Practice

Where can a student practice English? Is classroom interaction enough for students to learn another language which is not their native tongue? Do our ESL programs combine language learning theory into practice? How can we make second-language learning a lifelong experience? Many colleges have developed learning communities across academic disciplines and outside the college. Programs such as Home Stay, Happy Families, and Community Outreach are useful for ESL students in which students practice their language and exchange cultural norms. The main goal of such learning communities is to offer student active engagement and reflection. The learning communities at Kingsborough Community College in New York began in 1995 with the Intensive ESL program. This program "serves 10 cohorts of up to 25 first-semester ESL students who take five linked courses: ESL, Speech, two student development courses, and a general education course" ("Learning communities at Kingsborough," n.d.). Students in all learning communities need an extensive support that builds a smooth transition into college life.

Rewarding Goals and Motivation for ESL Learners

Tagg (2003) mentioned that intrinsic motivation helps students learn better. ESL programs should make the connection between the classroom materials and the outside classroom activities, which may support intrinsic motivation. Second language learning activities should provide learners ownership which may increase the students' sense of responsibility for learning. At Olivet College, for example, every incoming student affirms a commitment as "I am responsible for...my own learning and personal development...." (Tagg, 2003, p. 137).

It is important to understand the goals of the students who join the ESL program. Program goals should support student goals and not just be a cash cow project for universities. What are ESL learners' goals? Is that to pass ESL course and get admission to a university or to get a job? ESL programs should redefine their goals to meet the expectations of learners. The Olivet ESL department has several programs through which students are required to work in the community as a part of the college course work. Miami Dade Community College in Florida has the largest ESL academic department whose mission is to serve "the immigrant population to learn English" ("ESL and Foreign Languages," n.d.).

ESL Student Performances

Learners acquire skills and knowledge through performance in which students transfer knowledge into new application. Tagg (2003, p. 145) said students' performance should be "authentic, frequent and connected". In ESL programs, the instructors should develop an active curriculum with extracurricular activities to emphasize student's performance. Language learning should be collaborative, service-based and practical. Alvrno College's curriculum, for example, has included eight abilities—communication, analysis, problem solving, decision making, social interaction, global perspectives, effective citizenship and aesthetic responses ("English as Second Language," n.d.)

Scholarships and Awards to Attract ESL Students

Funding issues are critical for ESL students (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). A large number of ESL students are immigrants, undocumented, refugees, asylum seekers or international. These students are not supported by any kind of scholarship or federal work study scheme but they pay fairly expensive tuition for ESL programs. Students pay out-of-state fees or international fees in ESL programs. The tuition fees for those ESL students should be affordable. Texas and

California do not charge these students with out-of-state fees like many other states. The Community College of Philadelphia, as an exemplary initiative, has been serving students through My Degree Now—a scholarship program that encourages students to complete the degree, and Opportunity Now—a tuition-free opportunity for laid off workers.

Where Does the Learning-Centered Environment not Work?

Is the learning-centered experience appropriate for ESL students, unmotivated and immature students? According to Blumberg (2010), the learner-centered approach is highly applicable in all situations. It was just a myth that the learning-centered approach cannot be used with ESL or unmotivated and immature students.

Transformation of learning based ESL programs in college is not easy. The college system considers ESL as a limited discipline. Instructors are not familiar with the learning paradigm in the ESL department. There is not enough collaboration; teachers do not share what each other could be better at. Limited resources, unmotivated teachers and a large number of students are the barriers in ESL departments and elsewhere. Faculty development, student support services and curricular coherence are the areas to improve ESL programs in the colleges and universities. At the Capital Community College, the mission is to both support and prepare students for their careers after college. The College has designed "a computer-aided language learning facility [that] offers a range of software, audio, video and online learning tools to students enrolled in the ESL Program" (Chen, 2008, Para 6).

Conclusion

The learning-centered community colleges have been significantly shaping the notion of learning in higher education. Instructors are constantly modifying their methods of instruction from

teacher-centered to learner-centered. As a part of a learning college, ESL programs in the institutions of higher learning should expand pedagogies, programs, and resources. ESL programs are extremely diverse—immigrants, refugees, undocumented and international students, and there should be learner-centered activities to engage these students. The learner-centered college should offer enough learning resources and skills to students, and trainings and workshops on pedagogies and technologies to instructors to modify the culture of learning. This eventually can help colleges implement learning-centered activities to support their learners in ESL and other academic programs. ESL instructors also should change their hearts and minds to bring a culture of learning-centered ESL programs.

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