

Sociology Pedagogical Workshop Series

Student-Centered Teaching

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Think – Pair – Share

- **Think** back to your favorite class and/or favorite professor in college.
 - What was it about that class/professor that stood out?
- **Pair** with a partner at your table and **share** your experience.
 - Do your experiences have anything in common?

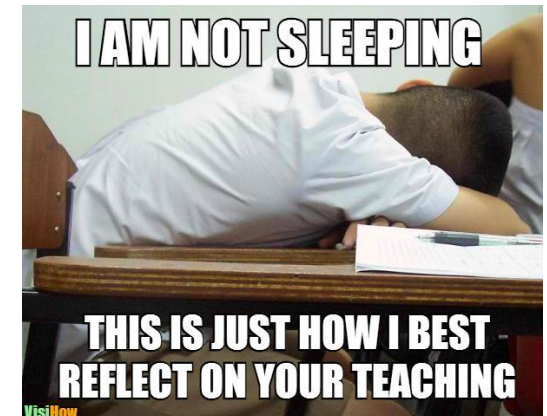
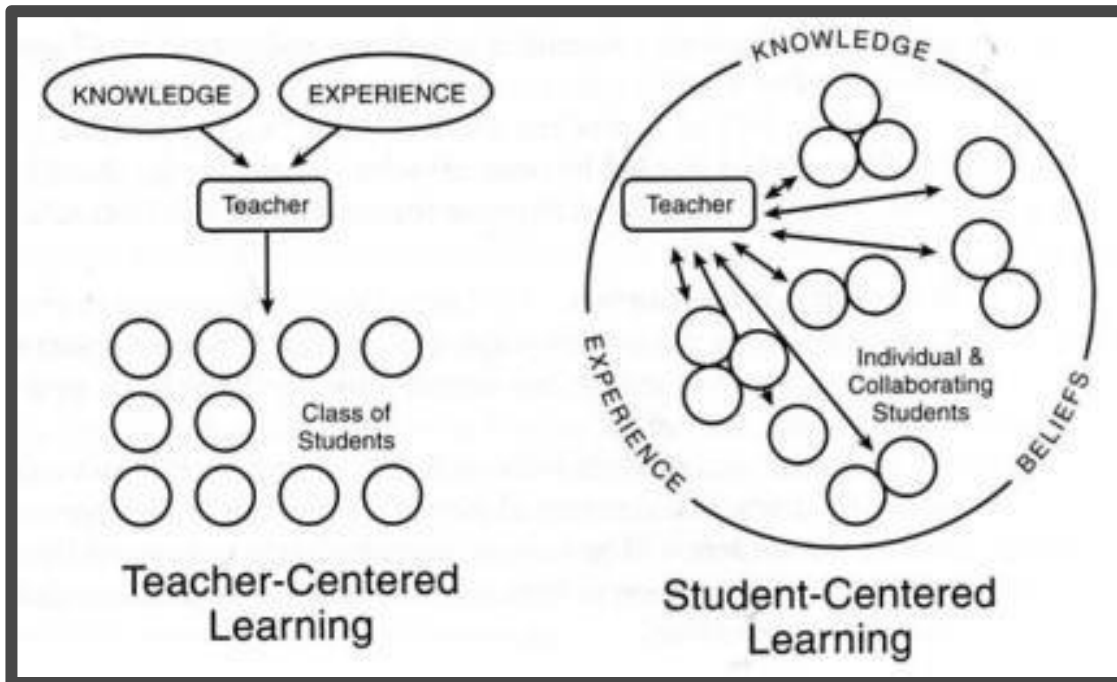


Workshop Objectives

- By the end of this workshop, you should be able to:
 1. Know what student-centered teaching is and why it is preferable for long-term learning
 2. Articulate the difference between student-centered and instructor-centered
 3. Identify four elements of a student-centered classroom
 4. Brainstorm a student-centered activity for one of your (future) courses

Traditional Lecture

- “Sage on the Stage”
- Instructor is the source of knowledge
- Institutionalized
 - Widely recognized/supported



Student-Centered Teaching

- Also known as “student-centered learning” or “learner-centered teaching”
- A style of teaching that shifts **away** from the professor as the sole source of knowledge **in favor** of a collaboration between students and professor
- Student centered teaching makes students an active part of the learning process
 - Does not mean the absence of instruction
 - Rather, instruction + interaction
 - Professor combines the roles of **instructor** and **facilitator**
- Challenges
 - Students may not like it – more demands beyond the “exam cram”
 - Professors may not like it – entails a loss of some control

Why Student-Centered?

- Based on the **constructivist** theory of learning
- Learners are not blank slates or sponges
- Learning happens when information is made **meaningful** by combining *new information* with *prior experience*

Why Student-Centered?

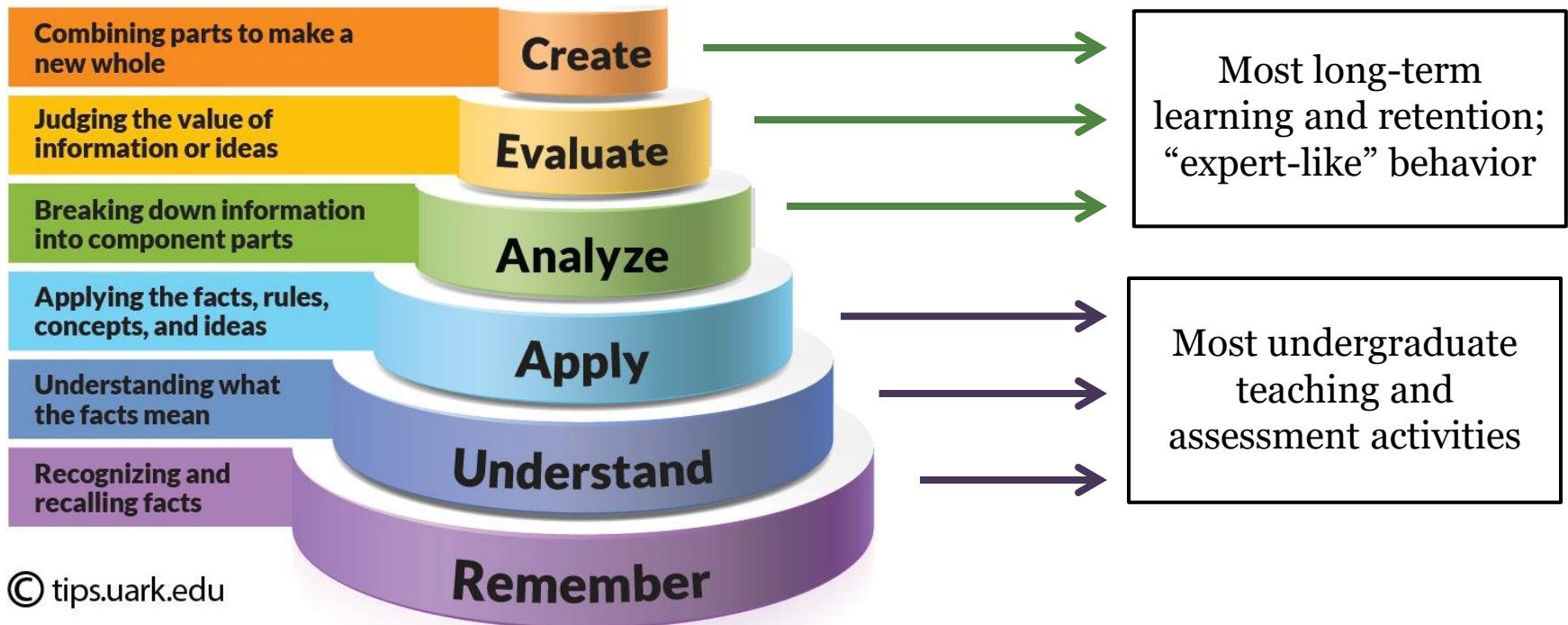
“When I interviewed one of the mathematicians in the study, he asked me if I knew how to define a function. I confessed that my knowledge was a little rusty, and that the definition I remembered memorizing in college didn’t spring immediately to mind, something about variables being related to the values of other variables. “But can you explain the basic concept in your own words?” he persisted.

“I stammered and began looking for the nearest exit. At that point, he tossed a pen in my direction, which I instinctively reached out to catch. “How did you catch that?” he asked. “I opened my hand and then closed it around the pen at the right moment.” “But how did you know when to open your hand and when to close it?” he pressed. After a little struggling, and some additional questioning from the mathematician, I stumbled to the conclusion that I predicted where the pen would be by observing its flight.

“That’s a function!” he exploded. “You took information about where it was at this point, this point, and this point, and predicted when it would arrive in your hand.” He then turned to the board and wrote a formula. “I could have explained it this way, and that’s the way it’s ordinarily done. But when we do it that way, students just memorize formulas or definitions and really don’t grasp what’s involved in the concept.” (Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*)

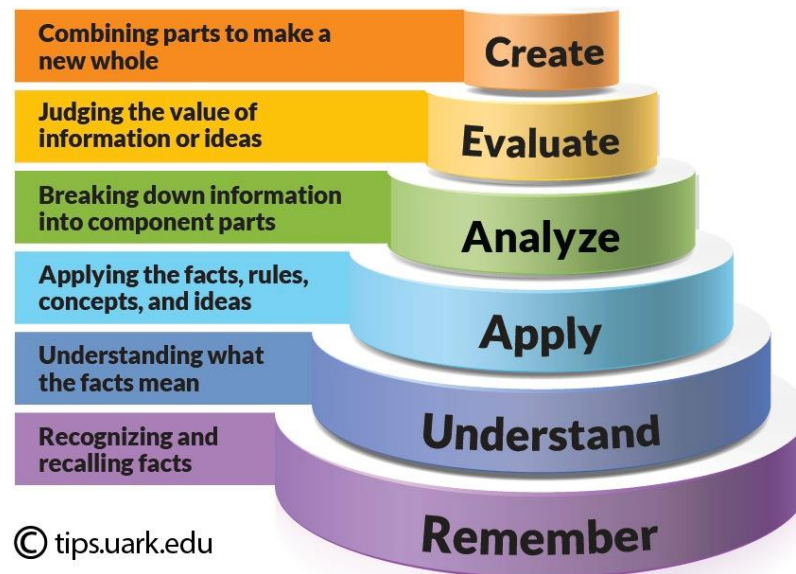
Why Student-Centered?

- Encourages **higher-order thinking** skills
- Students have the opportunity to engage more richly, encouraging “expert-like” behavior



Think – Pair – Share

- Recall a memorable assignment/project that you were required to do as an undergraduate (*good or bad*).
- What made the assignment memorable?
- What level of thinking matches that assignment?



Why Student-Centered?

- Naturally fits with **sociology**
- We teach students to harness their pre-existing social knowledge into sociological knowledge
 - **Constructivist model**
- We teach students to train their “sociological imaginations” and engage critically, constantly
 - **“Expert Like Behavior”**



Student-Centered vs. Instructor-Centered

- The instructor **demonstrates** their expertise
- **Talking is shared** between the instructor and the students
- Most students are **speaking**, even if only in small groups
- The instructor **elicits students' thoughts**, questions and reflections
- Student performance happens **frequently** and **outside of formal assessment** (exams)
- The instructor **lectures** from their expertise
- **The instructor** does most of the talking
- Most students are **passive spectators**/note-takers
- The instructor has **very little idea** of what students are thinking
- Student performance is **minimal** and based **mostly on formal assessment** (exams)

Write Down...

- A class that you have taught (or that you have TA'd for and/or anticipate teaching one day)
- A particular topic in that course that is (or might be) tricky for students to grasp
- How you have (or would) go about teaching that topic

Goal: How can we make teaching that topic more student-centered?

Elements of a Student-Centered Teaching Practice

1. Get their attention and keep it
2. Start with the students rather than the discipline
3. Create a “natural-critical” learning environment
4. Engage students in disciplinary thinking

**From Kevin Bain. 2004. *What the Best College Teachers Do*.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.**

1. Get Their Attention and Keep It

- Going “beyond the blueprint” at the beginning of lecture
- Get students’ attention with some kind of provocative act, question, or statement.
- Several strategies:
 - DO something unusual
 - PROPOSE a question or problem
 - Hypothetical scenario
 - Based on current or historical events, life experiences
 - An artificial debate
 - PRESENT a case study or vignette
 - PLAY a game where students have to interact

2. Start with the Students, Rather than the Discipline

- Example: How did you learn to play a sport?
- Disciplinary/curriculum imperatives are not easily recognized by students
 - Students are novices
 - Instructors' expertise is taken for granted
- Discipline provides the framework, but the framework won't make sense unless students have the language and the chance to practice
- Use the discipline to craft learning objectives for your lecture, then work backwards
 - What way of thinking are students likely to bring with them to your class/topic?
 - What kind of question or problem would get students to leverage/challenge their own (mis)information?

3. “Natural-Critical” Learning Environment

- **“Natural”** because students encounter the skills, habits, and information they need embedded in questions and tasks
- **“Critical”** because the questions/tasks require the students to think critically, reason from evidence, and draw conclusions.
- A Crucial Process
 1. Start with an intriguing question or problem
 2. Guide students to see the significance of the question
 3. Provide students with an activity for engaging in higher-order thinking required of experts in your field
 4. The activity should prompt students to draw conclusions and answer the question at hand.
 5. Discussion on the implications of the question/conclusions – prompting students to discover “the next question”

Examples of “Natural-Critical” Learning

- **Philosophy:** Do you know *anything* for sure?
- **Art History:** Is it a Rembrandt?
- **History:** Invitation to a Revolution
- **Law/Ethics:** Supreme Court Ruling

How can students learn your topic by doing, rather than by listening?

- Useful ideas for a starting point
 - Simulations
 - Case Studies
 - Fieldwork
 - Props
- How does the activity engage expert-like behavior?

Brainstorm a Natural-Critical Exercise

1. What is an intriguing question or problem in this topic?
2. What is the significance of the question/problem?
3. What is an exercise that students can do to work through the skills and reasoning necessary for answering that problem?
 - Case study, fieldwork, simulation, props, hypothetical scenario?
4. Will students be able to draw conclusions and answer the question at hand?
5. What are implications of the question/conclusions?

1. *How is underrepresentation built into college campuses?*
2. *Role of the campus in reproducing educational inequality*
3. *Fieldwork: have students make sociological observations around campus*
4. *Answers on who/what is visible on campus and where*
5. *How can campuses change their environments? Why don't they?*



4. Engage Disciplinary Thinking

- Not enough to “perform” sociology in front of students
 - Students do not recognize your reasoning process
- Not enough to deliver encyclopedic knowledge to students
 - Students do not recognize the significance or interconnections
- Your expert-like behavior cannot simply be mimicked, students need to learn *how to reason* in the way you reason
- Combine teaching *the curriculum/content* with teaching students *the skills* for thinking sociologically
 1. Empirical puzzle?
 2. What kind of evidence and how to gather it?
 3. Quality of the evidence?
 4. Tentative conclusions?
 5. Further questions?
- Demonstrate disciplinary thinking explicitly during your natural-critical activities

Student-Centered Teaching in Large Classes

- Break students into groups or pairs
 - Based on where they are sitting
 - Numbering
- Physically move students around the room; section off the lecture hall into meaningful areas
- Use TA's and Readers as facilitators
- Get the students outside the classroom
- Build in student-centered breaks
 - Rather than “any questions,” try “with a neighbor, decide the three most important things we have discussed so far today”

Remember...

- People learn most effectively (i.e. a sustained influence on how they think, act, or feel) when:
 1. They are trying to solve a problem that is meaningful
 2. They are able to do so in a challenging but supportive environment in which they feel a sense of control
 3. They can work collaboratively
 4. They believe their efforts will be considered fairly
 5. They can try, falter, receive feedback separate from any judgement/grade, and try again
- Engaging higher-order sociological thinking is the key to helping students develop their **sociological imagination**



Invitation to Sociology
Peter Berger

To be sure, sociology is an individual pastime in the sense that it interests some and bores others...But the word “pastime” is weak in describing what we mean.

*Sociology is more like a **passion**. The sociological perspective is more like a demon that possesses one, that drives one compellingly, again and again, to the questions that are its own.*

An introduction to sociology is, therefore, an invitation to a very special kind of passion.