Student Centred Learning (SCL) – the dance of learning or the burden of learning.

These notes were developed after a series of induction sessions around “what is student centered teaching and learning” were held with sessional staff in the Portfolio of Business. They have been included here to assist you to reflect on your teaching practice and how it may incorporate aspects of, or be directed by, notions of student centered learning and teaching.

Teachers highlighted the points below as key aspects of SCL (student centered learning)

- Students in control
- Students pick topics
- Students have different starting points
- Students bring knowledge to the classroom, and bring different knowledge to the teacher. This knowledge is valuable and can be used to connect to the academic curriculum by the teacher
- Students have knowledge, they are not empty vessels
- Students engage with the curriculum at their own pace and direct their learning in ways that make sense to them.

What makes it easy to teach and learn with SCL?

1) Students come from diverse backgrounds.
2) Students have different starting points.
3) Any and every topic offers opportunities to connect to different students
4) Sessional staff often take tutorials and demonstration lectures – this affords them greater opportunities to connect and interact with students than full time teaching staff, and explore the curriculum through students’ experiences.
5) Cultural differences amongst students offer numerous ways to connect and add diversity to curriculum content.
6) Diverse and large student groups provide teachers with a plethora of opportunities to connect their curriculum to students’ knowledge. Students apply curriculum content to their own examples.
7) Assessments offer teachers opportunities to connect to students.
8) If we can understand how we learn we can connect to students’ learning practices and hence to students.
9) Understanding how we learn allows us to understand why we want to learn – we can translate this knowledge to students. This is the dance of learning.

What makes it difficult to teach and learn with SCL?

1) Students who are outcome orientated – assessment driven.
2) Discipline – difficult to engage in SCL in technical fields/disciplines, some topics easier than others.
3) Cultural differences amongst students.
4) Students with diverse starting points.
5) Large student groups – plus points 3 and 4.
6) Connecting to students – each one different.
7) Sessional staff have little or no control over the curriculum content including assessment.
8) Large classes (300 plus in some instances) makes it difficult for student/teacher/curriculum interactive activities.

9) Students don’t want to engage in learning, they are outcome/assessment orientated. This is the burden of learning.

*Can SCL transform the burden of learning into the dance of learning?*

**What is the “burden of learning?”**

It is those things that make learning a burden – from late nights, to long working hours, conflicting responsibilities and demands and the more mundane but no less burdensome emotional baggage of learning:

- the fear of not knowing,
- the anxiety of not being good enough,
- the panic associated with “not being ready in time,”
- the hopelessness of not being in control and the fear of letting go.

You, as teachers, need to connect to the burden of learning so that you can transform it into a dance for yourself and your students. Why is this transformation important? It is important because this is what you ask your students to do every time you walk into a classroom – big or small, virtual or real. You ask them to engage with the burden and turn it into a dance. This transformation is at the heart of SCL.

One way to explore how we can transform the burden of learning into the dance of learning is to explore the bottom-line of SCL. This transformation cannot be brought about by having a large repertoire of tips and tricks, it can only occur by understanding why this tips and tricks work.

For example, we know that offering sweets and chocolates to students to generate discussions in classes, big and small, works, but why does it work?

1. *What is happening when we hold up a mini mars bar and say: “does anyone want to have a go at addressing this or that question?”*

2. *We know that if we ask students to tell us what they have learnt at the end of a teaching session that we can use this information to evaluate our teaching methods and explore where students are in relation to their learning and our course. But what is in this practice that is student centered?*

Many of you might, correctly, point out that the two questions above have the same answer. That is, when we offer students sweets we are trying to **connect** to them – not to their stomachs – but to their desire to interact with others and engage in learning.

When we ask them what they have learnt at the end of a session we are again trying to **connect** with where they are. It is not about connecting to what we have said.
(repeated by a student). Rather the importance of the connection is our desire to understand how what we have said has been interpreted by students.

Furthermore, in asking students to tell us what they have learnt, we are connecting our desire for learning to the student’s desire to learn.

In each of the above instances, we are connecting to where our students are:
• where they are in relation to topic content;
• where they are in relation to understanding the topic content; and
• where they are in relation to where we and the course (including assessment) are.

It could be suggested that the bottom-line behind the teaching and learning practices that support SCL is a desire to connect to where our students are, and to direct that connection in diverse ways.

How can SCL be fostered?
If we accept that we need to maintain a connection to where our students are (in relation to the three dot points above) in order to foster SCL, what supports these connections?

1. Evaluate/feedback – frequently, formerly and informally.
You can find out more about evaluation in the website, it is suffice to say here that it is a key aspect of SCL. A useful form of feedback, and an integral aspect of evaluating our own teaching, is to ask students at the beginning and end of each session:
• “What do you know in relation to this topic?’’
• “What have you learnt today?’’
• “What are the three key things that you have learnt in this session today?’’

2. Link Sessions
Commence a session with a re-cap of the previous session. This is to provide some sense of linkage between the sessions and to establish a level playing field to all learners at the outset of the session.

3. Structure sessions to support SCL practices
Structure sessions so that you will maximize opportunities for feedback. For example, at the outset discuss what learning activities will be used, evaluate the learning outcomes against the activities, compare with the intended learning outcomes, allow time for discussion and reflection of teaching and learning experiences. Always provide a framework for the session at the outset. These may all sound time consuming, but they can be managed in ways that support the delivery of course content not distract from it, and more importantly support SCL and reduce teacher and student angst.
This paper is a very brief and surface approach to SCL. It is designed as an accessible introduction into what is SCL and how a sessional teacher, or any teacher/supervisor, engage in SCL teaching and learning practices.

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