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ARTICLE

Teaching and Learning: Moving Toward a Subject-Centered Approach in the Classroom

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In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates says: "Our need will be the real creator." That insight on the power of creativity to produce innovative solutions for complex challenges has morphed into the observation that "necessity is the mother of invention." During the pandemic's darkest moments, educators built the silver lining. More than simply "pivoting" in response, teachers learned completely new methods of engagement while they tapped into reservoirs of resilience, helping students do the same.

ough the uncharted territory of masks and distancing, educators longed for the urn to normalcy. But this period inspired introspection, leading them to push against

anxiety, disillusionment, and despair through a reconsideration of why they teach—and how. What is the relationship between mission and method, and what does this suggest about identity and who we are as educators?

I began to consider my own pedagogy and the intention behind my teaching. As a student, I had learned how to be successful in a teacher-centered classroom: a focused sponge of information, ready to produce the correct answer. As an educator, I adapted my approach when I was in graduate school and the pendulum started to swing to a student-centered approach, focused on active engagement, participation, and project-based learning where students work together in a process of discovery. And now, as educators continue to adapt to the present needs and opportunities, there's another approach to consider.

Seeing Change

One of my colleagues spoke of the teacher moving from "the sage on the stage to the guide on the side" and the classroom becoming the arena where "the ones who do the work do the learning." As educational consultant and author Grant Lichtman points out in *Moving the Rock: Seven Levers WE Can Press to Transform Education*, student-centered teaching "transforms the factory model classroom into a deeper learning experience more relevant and attuned to the future needs of students." This shift moves schools from a 19th century model that persisted into most of the 20th century toward a 21st century approach that is forward-looking. This approach educates students in the skills and habits required for the future, centering the learning around student engagement, curiosity, and innovation. There are undeniable merits to the student-centered approach. However, this shift from teacher to student presents its own challenges.

There is also something to be said for teacher-facilitated learning, the dissemination of knowledge by an expert in their field, and the validation of an educator's perspective and insight. However placing the emphasis completely on a teacher- or a student-centered approach seems to miss the point. Educators shouldn't focus solely on one or the other. In truth, all teachers work on their craft by combining a range of pedagogical techniques to scaffold learning and support active engagement, mindful of the ways in which the latest research from neuroscience, social-emotional learning, child and adolescent development, and practices of equity inform our understanding of teaching and learning. Combining approaches leads to one that is more relevant for today: a subject-centered approach, which places the topic of study at the center

and acknowledges the shared engagement of teacher and students as learners in the classroom.

Subject Matters

In *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Parker Palmer describes the subject-centered approach: "Modeled on the community of truth, this is a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focused on a great thing, a classroom in which the best features of teacher- and student-centered education are merged and transcended by putting not teacher, not student, but subject at the center of our attention."

Within the particularity of our 21st century historical circumstance and as we emerge from a global pandemic, the emphasis on the subject-centered approach is both timely and necessary because of the following:

We long to gather around a fire. Gathering around the center of great things resonates with who we are as human beings, encouraged to gather into a community of shared bonds and understanding. Just as the earliest humans gathered around the central fire, so too are students and teachers invited into a sacred circle of learning in the classroom, focused not on themselves but on the subject that can provide warmth and light, provoking transformation and transcendence.

We want to connect with something greater than ourselves. Students of every age share the desire for authentic meaning-making, which the psychologist Erik Erikson defined as the crucible of identity formation. Students seek to be challenged and uplifted, inspired by teachers who make the subject come alive. According to Palmer, the classroom honors students' need "to be introduced to a world larger than their own experiences and egos, a world that enlarges their sense of boundaries and enlarges their sense of community" and honors teachers' need "to invigorate those connections between our subjects, our students, and our souls that make us whole again and again."

We must cultivate more humility. In an age when the tendency toward certainty leads to polarized discourse at every level, we need to cultivate the humble stance that recognizes we still have much to learn and that civil discourse in a classroom of learners (teacher and students), focused on the subject, is the path toward a community of truth, deep listening, and empathetic understanding. We must privilege

the text and not the person. As Palmer points out, “Humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen.” Humility is not a denial of self but rather an informed realization discovered in a dynamic community of truth that does not veer into absolutism nor relativism. It affirms “the humble yet exalted reality of the human self, a paradoxical pearl of great price.”

We need to build communities of collaboration. A global pandemic, threats to democracy, challenges to free speech, racial reckoning, environmental crisis and degradation—this generation’s challenges cannot be solved through the rugged individualism of self-reliance. They can only be addressed through the collaborative partnership of individuals who circle around the greater good that transcends their self-interests and yet connects to the shared interest we have as human beings.

Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner has said that true vocation is found when “your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” The discovery of our deep gladness or our heart’s deep desire is revealed through the contemplation of great things. Communities of collaboration need to be formed at all levels to test, challenge, explore, and move beyond what divides us.

We must strive to be relational in an increasingly transactional world. The irony of most social media is the way in which it masks its transactional identity in the guise of a relational medium. Spending time with teenagers reveals the impact of the relentless urge to polish the curated self, the anxiety of FOMO, and the need to feel the dopamine rush associated with seeing a post shared and liked. In this world of limited attention, the community of truth gathered in the classroom places the subject at the center and creates meaningful and sustained engagement through a relational context for learning.

As we emerge on the other side of this pandemic, now more than ever, schools should endeavor to keep the subject at the center. We owe it to ourselves, our schools, and our children’s children.

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