Marian Library Faculty Publications   The Marian Library

2019

Review: 'Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice'

Kayla Harris (0000-0002-1672-3022)

As authors Kevin Michael Klipfel and Dani Brecher Cook explain in the introduction to *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice*, theory can be a challenge for many in the information field. What is taught in graduate school is not always applicable to the everyday situations encountered within libraries and archives. The balance between understanding theory and applying the principles in context is a delicate one, but the authors address this issue immediately. Klipfel and Cook explain that while the book's main ideas are backed by theory from outside disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, and education, they acknowledge that practitioners want ideas that can be applied in library settings. They state that "the methodology behind this book is therefore a fundamentally pragmatic one: we are interested in what works in practice."[1] Klipfel and Cook expertly combine theory and real examples within this evidence-based guidebook that library practitioners can frequently return to. While learner-centered pedagogy has many facets, the authors summarize their overall philosophy toward learning and teaching as "who we are as people matters."[2]

Both authors are well qualified to discuss learner-centered pedagogy and utilize their experiences both as learners and librarians in compelling examples throughout the text. Klipfel holds a master's degree in philosophy and has presented both inside and outside the library field on student motivation and learning. Cook, the director of teaching and learning at the University of California, Riverside, has published on information literacy pedagogy and learning technologies. Learner-centered pedagogy, or student-centered pedagogy—the authors prefer to use *learner* rather than *student* to widen the understanding beyond just educational settings —is more than active learning techniques or best practices that instructors and librarians can use in a classroom. Throughout the text Klipfel and Cook refer to instructors when explaining concepts, and then will follow with an example specifically for librarians. Given the author's backgrounds, these examples are geared toward reference and instructional librarians, though most of the concepts and practices discussed can be applied in a myriad of ways depending on the context.

Learner-centered pedagogy is a way of looking at the world, a way of seeing each learner as an individual with their own abilities and interests. Learner-centered education first became a topic of critical importance for K-12 educators in the early 1990s when the report, "Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: Guidelines for School Design and Reform," was issued by the American Psychological Association.[3] Bringing together theory from different disciplines, the report formalized some of the changing dynamics within teaching and learning that many practitioners had already realized. With a learner-centered approach, the responsibility for learning is shifted from the instructor to the learner. A learner must be an active participant in constructing their own meaning and are not just passive receivers of knowledge from an authority figure.

After defining and providing the background behind learner-centered pedagogy, the authors use the remainder of chapter 1 to outline some of the humanistic texts that influenced and shaped their own understanding, particularly the work done by psychotherapist Carl Rogers. An

---

[1] Kevin Michael Klipfel and Dani Brecher Cook, *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2017), xiii.

[2] Ibid., 2.

[3] Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education, American Psychological Association, "Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: Guidelines for School Design and Reform," January 1993, accessed June 7, 2019, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED371994.

influential figure in the field of humanistic psychology, Rogers is best known for his human-centered approach to therapy. Though it may seem a common understanding today, his view that human connection is the most important aspect of therapy was radical for his time. A solid human connection leads to empathy, the ability to understand another person's feelings, and this is at the core of learner-centered pedagogy, with empathy being explored more fully in chapter 3.

Chapter 2, "Curiosity and Learning: The Importance of Authenticity and Autonomy," uses personal examples from the authors' experiences to highlight the importance of motivation and self-directed learning. A previous study by Klipfel found that students are more likely to choose a research topic that they feel will be "easier" than one that connects to their interests.[4] Instructors can increase motivation beyond encouraging students to connect research topics to their interests. For example, the authors point out some subtle changes in language and behavior that instructors can make to be less controlling, and therefore increase students' autonomy and motivation for their own learning. Outside of the classroom, librarians (and archivists) can apply this concept in practice by relinquishing control of the keyboard when working with a student to search a catalog, allowing them to type instead of the traditional method of librarian typing and navigating while the student watches. It is through these easily actionable examples that Klipfel and Cook's writing is most clear and effective.

To apply the principle "who we are as people matters" to learning, the authors turn to empathy. Chapter 3, "Empathy and the Science of Learning: Lessons from Cognitive Literature," outlines six cognitive principles for how to organize information literacy instruction, explaining the psychological research, followed by an example of each principle in practice. While it is understandable that the authors would draw upon their own interactions to use in examples, many of the scenarios presented a near-stereotype of the cool, young librarian who was able to develop relationships with students because of their similar interests. In a scenario mentioning the rapper Drake to explain how to build a narrative, the authors state,

> The example is manifestly not about being hip ("Oh, this guy is cool, he likes hip-hop!") or about trying to relate to students by guessing what their interests might be (as in, "Oh, Drake is really popular right now. I bet all the students will relate to this example so they'll really pay attention") . . . The goal, as discussed in chapter two, is to support learners' autonomy, rather than try to pick a cool topic for the student."[5]

This self-awareness from the authors, recognizing that their examples up until this point may have given readers the wrong impression about what it takes to connect with students, is refreshing. Just as the authors want students to be their true selves, it would have been disingenuous if they had avoided using their own experiences so that they didn't alienate readers. Through this clarification, readers can interpret the examples beyond the superficial layer of a librarian trying to look "cool."

In addition to empathy, educational psychology places importance on authentic relationships as a catalyst for learning. Chapter 4, "Relationships: The Heart of Learner-Centered Pedagogy," uses

---

[4] K. M. Klipfel, "Authentic Engagement: Assessing the Effects of Authenticity on Student Engagement and Information Literacy in Academic Library Instruction," *Reference Services Review* 42, no. 2 (2014): 229–45.
[5] Klipfel and Cook, *Learner-Centered Pedagogy*, 85.

theories from cognitive psychology to explain why relationship-building is centrally linked to learning. Referring to a term defined by David K. Maxfield, "counselor librarianship," the authors underline that this does not mean that librarians need to be therapists, but rather that they should aim to facilitate learning experiences that value the learner as an individual. This discussion comes very close to placing yet another role on the librarian, a type of job creep similar to that which Fobazi Ettarh discusses in her article on vocational awe, but the authors argue that many librarians are already engaging in this practice regardless of whether they apply that specific term. They state, "all learner-centered librarians, whether they realize it or not, are counselor librarians; it's simply a matter of whether or not we're up for the challenge."[6]

The first four chapters focus on how to get learners invested and build relationships, but sometimes students still encounter challenges on their path to learning. Within chapter 5, "Trusting the Process: Cultivating a Growth Mindset," the authors explore fixed mindset and growth mindset, two different approaches to learning, first developed by psychologist Carol Dweck in the 1990s. Learners who have a fixed mindset believe that there is a limit to what they can learn or accomplish based on personal characteristics or qualities that cannot be changed, whereas those with a growth mindset focus more on process than results, and do not think an ability to learn is predetermined by a person's intelligence.

A growth mindset does not come naturally to most, but Klipfel and Cook look at ways a learner-centered librarian can facilitate a growth mindset within their students. One example is to focus praise on the process of research, not the student's innate intelligence. For students to have a growth mindset, they must believe that they can improve, and this can be demonstrated by dispelling the myth of a linear research process that does not take failure or setbacks into account. The authors also encourage learner-centered librarians to engage in reflection about their teaching to encourage their own growth mindset, since teaching improves through practice.

In addition to reflecting on teaching techniques and practice, a learner-centered librarian should also reflect on their use of tools and technology for instruction. In chapter 6, "The Learner-Centered Technologist," Klipfel and Cook provide a framework with a set of three questions to evaluate whether an individual tool is learner-centered. The questions are then used by the authors on case studies for Prezi, clickers, course guides, flipped classroom technology, and chat tools.

Prezi, an online presentation tool that was very popular a few years ago, was supposed to be an alternative to dull PowerPoint presentations and would supposedly get people to pay attention to lectures. The ability of presenters to zoom in and out, twirl and flip, was exciting for some and nausea-inducing for many. Prezi presents a clear example of a technology failing all three aspects of the learner-centered test. In addition to being inaccessible for those with visual impairments, it is fundamentally still an aid for a lecture and therefore does not allow an instructor to do something that they would not be able to do otherwise. Most of the other examples are not as definitively learner-centered or not, indicating that specific application of a tool is more important than the technology itself.

---

[6] Klipfel and Cook, *Learner-Centered Pedagogy*, 125; Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (January 10, 2018), http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/.

Directed specifically at librarians in reference and instruction departments, *Learner-Centered Pedagogy* addresses a topic that is relevant to other practitioners within libraries, archives, and museums. The instructional examples focused on information literacy, but it would have been interesting to see some examples using other types of literacy instruction, such as primary source literacy or visual literacy. Perhaps this is an area for future exploration.

The conclusion briefly attempts to address how a librarian could apply learner-centered practice within what the authors identified as the five main areas of library practice: reference, instruction, outreach, collection development, and cataloging. Since most special collections often include all five areas, a reader can adapt some of the scenarios to what might work in a special collection setting, but an expansion of this section could have been helpful, and if included at the beginning, might have expanded the potential audience. For example, while an archivist could easily apply some of the lessons from the main chapters to their own instruction and reference interactions, what would it mean to apply the principle of "who we are as people matters" to an archival exhibit? Although the text does not answer this specifically for a special collection context, the authors do mention the need in the conclusion for a learner-centered librarian to create authentic connections by getting outside of the library. This aligns with activities that many archivists are already doing by working with diverse communities for collection development and outreach. Archivists are building more authentic relationships and exploring new methods of collaboration with constituents that will ultimately enhance learning experiences.

Klipfel and Cook created a very readable text, presenting pedagogy and theory in palatable form with their thorough explanations and practical applications for librarians. Although archivists are not explicitly included within *Learner-Centered Pedagogy*, most archivists should be able to see beyond the scenarios presented and utilize the underlying principles to make their specific work more learner-centered. As special collections librarians and archivists make advances in formalizing instructional practices, looking to reference and instruction librarian colleagues can only serve to improve the ability to connect specialized materials with learners of all types.

References

Ettarh, Fobazi. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (January 10, 2018), http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/.

Klipfel, K. M. "Authentic Engagement: Assessing the Effects of Authenticity on Student Engagement and Information Literacy in Academic Library Instruction." *Reference Services Review* 42, no. 2 (2014): 229–45.

Klipfel, Kevin Michael, and Dani Brecher Cook. *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice*. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2017.

Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education, American Psychological Association. "Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: Guidelines for School Design and Reform." January 1993, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED371994.