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Reviewing *Helping Students Learn in a Learner-Centered Environment: A Guide to Facilitating Learning in Higher Education*

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**Reviewing *Helping Students Learn
in a Learner-Centered Environment:
A Guide to Facilitating Learning in Higher Education***



Helping Students Learn in a Learner-Centered Environment:
A Guide to Facilitating Learning in Higher Education.
by Terry Doyle
Stylus Publishing, Copyright 2008. 194 pages.
ISBN 978-1-57922-222-2. \$24.95

by Linda Dunham

In *Helping Students Learn in a Learner-Centered Environment: A Guide to Facilitating Learning in Higher Education*, faculty and administrators will find a much needed guide to helping students learn more and remembering it longer. This book is especially helpful for the faculty members in higher education who have had little or no pedagogical study in teaching and learning strategies in their backgrounds and who may be searching for ways to improve student learning in the classroom. It is also beneficial to individuals seeking P-12 certification who may need a review on pedagogical materials covered on state certification examinations or who may wish to improve the quality of their own instruction in shifting to a more learner-centered classroom environment.

Terry Doyle has worked with students and faculty in a higher education setting for many years and has gathered enough feedback from his research to re-organize the information in a way that explains, simply and clearly, some of the difficulties in student learning. The first set of relevant information concerns student outlook to learning, which needs to be addressed and in a way that makes learning meaningful and functional to the college student today. Doyle defines the changes in students' roles and responsibilities in a learner-centered classroom and the problems that arise from this (from the students' point of view) paradigm shift. Students' outlook on learning is a problem because students shy away from taking responsibility for their own learning, thinking it will mean more work. Through tracking student opinion surveys over the years, Doyle has concluded the following about common student attitudes: (a.) it is better to appear lazy than to appear dumb, (b.) students don't read their texts and assigned readings because they believe teachers will cover the information anyway, c. competition for scholarships, honors program criteria and awards stimulates the competitive outlook that they make others look bad in order to make themselves look better. These effects of fear and stress are counter-productive to learning.

Doyle's findings in polling student reaction to learner-centered instruction were not always positive. As the instructor shifts instruction away from teacher-centered instruction and toward learner-centered instruction, learning does increase: "Teachers who know how to create community, engage students actively in their learning, make content challenging and interesting, teach students how to learn, give students choices about what and how they learn, and make learning meaningful, do impact student learning". The student must go from being a passive listener and note taker to being more involved and responsible for his or her own learning. This is the paradigm shift. It requires more work, and students often object to this; however, as Doyle states, "It is the one who does the work who does the learning" (p. 25).

Doyle's work causes a re-evaluation of instruction and a restructuring of instruction in a way that gives the student the research behind the techniques being used—the “why” behind the activity. If students are given the reason behind the change in what they have come to expect in traditional learning, the shift will be a bit more palatable.

Most of the concepts covered are not new to the certified teacher from the P-12 schools. The concepts are very basic to the psychology of learning, but the writing style Doyle employs makes this book easy to read and provides a review of the materials with additional stimulus and information. The text gives college professors who may not have had educational pedagogy or the psychology of learning the tools needed for increasing and improving learning and retention in their courses. This book is a condensation of the learning principles, backed by the research needed to improve learning in any classroom. Students must understand that research should and does inform instruction. The definition of learning involves a change in the neural networks of the brain, where connections become long-term, but long-term retention depends on whether the teacher provides multiple opportunities for students to use their new networks. The more opportunities students have to use the new information, the stronger the connection.

The author points out the value of collaborative group work and includes guidelines for setting up and assessing group-learning products. He also covers the value of reflective assignments (e.g., journaling) and cumulative testing as a formative assessment and teaching tool. Brain research indicates that active engagement in learning, such as group projects and reflective practice, encourages dendrites in the brain to grow. Journal reflection helps them make connections in the brain as they explain the week's reading and how their thinking has changed. Presentations are also good student-centered learning activities, and an extensive list of benefits derived from student presentations is cited on page 46.

Doyle asserts that cumulative testing is a must in planning for optimal student learning, which mostly requires students to re-learn, review, and practice key information continuously. Cramming prior to an examination does not significantly aid long-term memory because information is often forgotten as soon as an exam is over. The combination of cumulative testing and active participation in between tests—via presentations, reflective journaling, projects, and discussion—helps process the information and commit the information to long-term memory. These are powerful tools in the creation of optimal student learning, and throughout the book, Doyle lists the research supporting each type of activity. Relaying to students what the research says about using reflective practice or group work, for example, helps them to understand why they must do more than listen passively. Being able to justify instructional choices with research and reflection is good practice to model for students as well as a practice that helps students understand and accept learner-centered learning.

Assessment strategies are covered in several aspects from self-assessment of students, to peer assessment and how to use these strategies as teaching tools. Doyle has provided models of rubrics in the appendix that can be used by students and faculty as models in assessing presentations, group work, collaboration, peer teaching and presentations. He has also provided a website to aid the instructor in modifying these rubrics for assessment purposes or for class materials to be used by student groups.

Even for faculty who are familiar with educational pedagogy or brain research, Doyle's book is a quick review, especially valuable in that so much research is linked and aligned to each topic covered. *Helping Students Learn in a Learner-Centered Environment* is excellent and a possible faculty development tool in a higher educational system that increasingly demands research based instruction.

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