

## **THE STUDENT - CENTERED CLASSROOM: TURNING THE STUDENT INTO AN AUTONOMOUS LEARNER**

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### **Abstract**

This bibliographical research aims to show the importance of a teaching approach that sees the student as the center of the teaching/learning process, but that does not exclude the teacher as an important character of the process. This work wants to show how students can benefit from this approach, which takes into account their reality and necessity and also answers a lot of questions that educators have to make school more relevant to the students of the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Constructivism. Student-Centered Teaching/Learning. Teacher as Facilitator.

## **A SALA DE AULA CENTRADA NO ESTUDANTE: TRANSFORMAR O ALUNO EM UM ALUNO AUTÔNOMO**

### **Resumo**

Este é um trabalho de pesquisa bibliográfica sobre a importância da abordagem de ensino que coloca o estudante como centro de todo o processo de ensino/aprendizagem, mas que não exclui o professor como agente indispensável desse processo. Esta pesquisa visa a mostrar como um ensino voltado para a realidade e necessidades do estudante pode trazer grandes benefícios e responder a muitas questões que rondam as mentes dos educadores e fazer com que a escola seja mais relevante para estes jovens do século XXI.

**Palavras-chave:** Construtivismo. Ensino Focado no Aluno. Professor Facilitador.

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## Introduction

It has been a while since the first talks about student-centered learning came to be. Authors have been thinking, discussing, and writing about the inefficacy of the traditional classroom practices since the seventies. The first attempts to develop a student-centered classroom, based on constructivism, were not very successful. Teachers were not prepared to be invisible, students were not mature enough to take the responsibility for their own learning, and parents were concerned with the quality of the education their kids were having. Some authors even previewed the death of the teaching profession. More than 40 years later education in Brazil is still struggling to reach a meaningful place in the world scenario. The results in international tests are poor and, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the country has a shameful 60<sup>th</sup> place in a ranking of education with 76 countries tested (OECD, 2015). So, in order to achieve a better level of learning, it is necessary to find a balance between the first views of the student-centered learning, where the teacher did not interfere much in the process, and the conventional way of teaching, where the teacher lectures and students pay attention. Teachers and the school system have to search new practices which will improve student's motivation and engage them in real learning, with the kind of knowledge they will take with them through their entire life and that will not be forgotten.

It is time to shed light on the importance of seeing the student as the most important character of the learning process without forgetting the crucial role of the teacher, not as a know-it-all but as a guide who will lead his/her students into the world of knowledge.

In order to be meaningful, learning must be relevant and bring the school environment closer to student's reality. This paper will provide information about relation between students and teachers in the classroom and the implications of turning from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one to enhance

student's motivation, develop their independence and incline them towards critical thinking.

What can the teacher do to help students learn? What is learning? Is it a repetition of what is heard or constructed through research? To answer these questions and explain the importance of the student-centered approach, some points must be considered.

### **How The Brain Learns**

According to Consenza and Guerra (2011) the brain is the most important part of our nervous system. It is through the brain that the information is processed (CONSENZA; GUERRA, 2011,p.11). Learning happens through a network of neurons that transmit the information by synapses, this information is temporarily stored in our short-term memory, later compared to existing memories and then, if considered relevant, stored in our long-term memory. The possibility of learning happens here, in the way one “convinces” the brain that a particular piece of information is relevant and must be stored in the long term memory (p.52).

As seen in Cosenza and Guerra (2011) when people learn new things, memory and recall are strengthened by frequency. The more we practice and rehearse something new, the easier it is for our brain to transmit these experiences efficiently and store them for ready access later (CONSENZA; GUERRA, 2011, p.72), so it can be concluded that practicing and rehearsing are important steps for students to retain information.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, intelligence is “the ability to learn or understand things or to deal with new or difficult situations, also the skilled use of reason and the ability to apply knowledge to manipulate one's environment or to think abstractly”. Although intelligence varies throughout time and space, as seen in Consenza and Guerra (2011), it can be considered as the ability to adapt to the environment and learn through experience, so it is extremely important to stimulate the brain. It will help to develop the nervous system and keep the capacity of the brain to learn. Although it is easier for young people to learn new things the capacity of learning is preserved throughout life (CONSENZA; GUERRA, 2011, p.35).

The personal history of each person is responsible for all the changes in the connections in the brain (p.28). Training and learning can create new synapses and facilitate the stream of information inside the brain. Learning can increase the number of connections among neurons, creating more complex linkage. This plasticity of the brain is the basis of the learning process, so, according to Concenza and Guerra (2011), learning is a consequence of facilitation of information passage in the synapses, which is a process that takes time (CONSENZA; GUERRA, 2011, p.38).

Selbach (2015) states that the amount of information people get every day is enormous, and it would be impossible to retain everything and that is why our brain tends to select information it considers important. The brain has “filters” that interfere in the process of memory, choosing which information should be stored and which should be disposed. These “obstacles” focus on what is really important to be learned. The task of the educator is to find ways to “seduce” these filters and convince them to open ways for the knowledge he/she wants the brain to learn (SELBACH, 2015 p.16).

Our brain has neither the need nor the capacity to process all the information it has contact with. The nervous system can select information, which can be blocked or accepted according to the relevance the brain gives to it. This process can sometimes be controlled, paying attention to some stimuli while ignoring others. This, as seen in Concenza and Gerra (2011), is called “attention”, which is primordial in the learning process. The brain is eager to learn what it finds relevant and teachers need to know the reasons why students are learning something and how he/she can help them acquire this knowledge. This is a great challenge for teachers. The brain is ready to learn what it sees as important, but the challenge here is to present the contents to be learned in a way students recognize them as important, say Concenza and Guerra (2011), who also believe that a stimulating environment can be created, engaging students in activities where they have an active role, not being only spectators. Student-centered lessons, interactivity, as well as goals to be reached will also trigger students’ attention (CONCENZA AND GUERRA, 2011, p.48).

## **Constructivism in the Classroom**

Based on Piaget's and Vygotsky's studies, constructivism gained strength in the 70s and 80s with a change in the way teachers, students and society perceived teaching and learning.

According to Solé and Coll (2009) it is not original to say that teaching is a hard task nowadays. There is no guarantee that everything the teacher planned for a class will actually work in a practical basis. Solé and Coll imply that theories about education can guide the teacher but are not, alone, the answer to all the questions. "Educators have to be able to lead and regulate the situation and adjust it to the goals they are seeking" (p.10). In order to achieve this objective it is important to think and rethink, design and redesign the acting according to what happens in practice (SOLE; COLL, 2009, P.9-10).

As seen in Solé and Coll (2009), it is time to consider the learning content as a social-cultural product, the teacher as the mediator between the student and society, and the student as a social learner. Learning cannot be isolated from culture. It is about time to have theories that do not put learning apart from culture and social development (SOLE; COLL, 2009, p.13-14). Bringing the learners' reality to the classroom and contextualizing the teaching will engage these students in meaningful learning, and, as said by Selbach (2010), will "seduce the students" and make them more willing to participate in the leaning process. Solé and Coll (2009) state that, however experienced teachers are in their practice, it is important to find references that lead them and justify their act (SOLE; COLL, 2009, p.11).

### **Turning the Student into an Autonomous Learner**

According to Freire (2015), teaching is not only transferring knowledge, it is creating possibilities for the production and construction of knowledge. It is important to incite curiosity and creativity. He also states that students must have the capacity of learning (p.27) and that calls for encouraging educators. Teachers in a student-centered environment must reflect about their practices. Freire defends that there is no teaching without research (p.30). Teachers need to study all the time, they have to be curious and encourage students to do the same. Teachers must also respect

students' autonomy, a teacher who disrespects the curiosity of the student, who disregards students' backgrounds, and does not listen to the students' opinions is not prepared for the modern classroom (FREIRE, 2015, p.27-30).

Jones states that "in a student-centered class, students don't depend on their teacher all the time, waiting for instruction, words of approval," but he also mentions that "A student-centered classroom isn't a place where the students decide what they want to learn and what they want to do." It is a communicative environment, where each student's previous knowledge is valued. In this classroom, teachers act as facilitators, not instructors. Jones says that "being a teacher means helping people to learn – and, in a student-centered class, the teacher is a member of the class as a participant in the learning process." (JONES, 2007 p.2).

The way students work in class may vary: they can work alone, preparing ideas for a discussion or reading a text, they may work in pairs or groups, comparing or debating their ideas, or even solving problems, and they ask the teacher for help to answer questions that could not be answered by the group, or to solve any doubts that might appear. So, teachers are supposed to be moving around the room, from group to group, showing they are available, offering suggestions, making corrections and giving feedback.

When students work together they tend to share their ideas and learn from each other's experience; they are more involved in the learning process and normally feel more secure and less anxious. On the other hand it is also possible to have shy students who might feel nervous, embarrassed or insecure when working in groups. These students need close attention, and teachers sometimes have to persuade them it is important and necessary to participate. Many students are accustomed to the teacher-centered classroom, and for this reason they are more teacher-dependent, waiting for instruction, praise and encouragement all the time.

The human being is curious and eager to learn from birth. This capacity must be enhanced from the beginning and teachers have to be open to this eagerness. As seen in Freire (p.111) a democratic teacher has to learn how to listen to the students. Whole education is not about training the students for tests, it is stimulating students in the continuous search for knowledge. When students construct their knowledge they learn to make their points and to be faithful to what they believe. A student who thinks critically is empowered to assume his place in society and defend his point of

view (p.132). The role of the teacher in this process is to refine the students' search, help them find their way through the world of knowledge (FREIRE, 2015).

## **The Student-Centered Classroom**

What is this student-centered classroom like? Jones (2007) proposes a classroom where students work mostly in cooperation with each other. Based on the activity proposed, the teacher can divide the classroom in pairs or small groups, giving the students the opportunity to socialize and exchange knowledge and experiences, but it is not always easy to convince students that they have to be responsible for their own learning. All over the world students are accustomed to having lectures from their teachers, and they want to receive "ready-to-go" knowledge. So, it is up to the teacher to find ways to convince their students that, in the long run, knowledge will be more meaningful if they think critically about what they learn. In the book *The Student Centered-Classroom* Jones gives lots of ideas of how to deal with different kinds of problems a teacher can face.

In a classroom where students can express their feelings, have a voice and where they are not supposed just to be quiet and listen, the relation between teachers and students is enhanced. Students are more motivated to participate in the activities. According to Freire (2015) the connection between the teacher's authority and students' freedom is an important point for the success of the learning process (FREIRE 2015, p. 89). Students learn better when they are involved and respected, when their curiosity is triggered and then they consequently enjoy what they are doing.

Jones (2007) mentions that the student-centered approach calls for cooperation among students. They communicate with each other, and each one gives his/her contribution to solve the problem proposed. "The emphasis is on working together, in pairs, in groups, and as a whole class." (JONES, 2007, p.2). The role of the teacher here is to facilitate learning, guiding the students, and also to encourage them to participate in the activities all the time.

A perfect classroom, as seen in Jones, would have wheeled chairs, so that the students could move around and interact with other students, but, as it is not the



reality, teachers have to work with what they have. What is crucial in a student-centered classroom is that students must face each other instead of looking at each other's back, as seen in most classrooms still nowadays. The teacher must not be the focus, the student is.

Jones also enumerates some problems teachers face when trying to use a student-centered approach. Some of them are very common in Brazilian classrooms, such as large noisy groups (p.11) with mixed abilities and different personalities. For each problem Jones proposes possible solutions. He believes that "the larger the class is, the more necessary it is to have a student-centered class" (p.4), which would give more time for each student to speak and expose their ideas. With all this talking the class can be particularly noisy, so students have to be encouraged to speak in a soft voice in order not to disturb the other groups (p.11). For the mixed-ability classroom Jones proposes cooperation among students, with weak students benefiting from stronger one's assistance during the learning process (p.5), although sometimes students with a higher level of knowledge are not willing to "waste their time" with the struggling ones. It is up to the teacher to interfere and help students to understand the value of cooperation and how much one can benefit from assisting a colleague and sharing their knowledge. And what can be said about the multiple-personality group? In this class the teacher will find a diversification of opinions which may enrich a discussion and help students to develop critical thinking and eventually lead to autonomy (JONES, 2007p.4-11).

Preparation is a crucial step when a teacher wants to adopt a student-centered approach. Jones says that teachers need to make sure that the students "know exactly what they are supposed to do and why (p.26). The most important point in this classroom is that the teacher does not lecture all the time, while students just listen and take notes. Students have their hands on the job and try to solve the problems by themselves, so the teacher must be ready to answer all the questions that might appear during the process and, as teachers do not know what questions will come up, they need to be prepared. A great example of a teacher who is not prepared to focus on the student is that teacher who asks questions and immediately answers them, without giving the student the opportunity to think about it and try to answer themselves (JONES, 2007).



## **Final Considerations**

The aim of this research was to investigate new forms of approach to the school environment and also find an alternative to the traditional classroom.

Studying how the brain learns shows that more interaction among students is needed. Being efficient the process of learning takes time, rehearsal and persuasion. The brain is not capable of attaining all the information it gets in contact with, so it tends to discard data that does not seem important. Teachers need to use all kinds of resources available to bring the classroom closer to the students' reality and make learning more relevant to them.

In order to construct their own knowledge students must be presented to the subjects in a pleasant way. Teachers have to be prepared to provide the opportunity for interaction. Students are not mere spectators, they are in the leading role of this process and the classroom is a venue where their thoughts and ideas can be shared and discussed.

Teachers need to give up their central position in the classroom in order to provide the students with conditions to be autonomous. Fear of losing their prestige in the classroom can be one of the causes for teachers being opposed to a student-centered approach, but it is important to understand that, although they are less heard in class, their influence and guidance are still substantial. They are still the leaders, the coaches, and the advisors. There is no need to be afraid because the role of the teacher is unreplaceable so far.

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