Student-Centeredness: A Concept Analysis

Cavelle Walters
The UWI School of Nursing, Mona, The University of the West Indies

Introduction

Traditional teaching is a long-established method of imparting knowledge that is mainly teacher-centred. The teacher is in full control of the learning process, and he/she plays the role of an instructor. Traditional lecture mode may be effective for transmitting a large body of content, however, these one-way exchanges often promote passive, superficial learning. (Armbruster, Patel, Johnson, & Weiss, 2009). Educators favour lectures and depend on rote learning and memorizing which tend to focus more on the lower levels of the cognitive domain of Bloom’s taxonomy; knowledge, comprehension and application (Clarke, 2010). As an alternative to traditional teaching, student-centeredness is gaining ground as a more effective approach to teaching in higher education (Barrett & Long, 2012). Dewey postulates that learning is a direct result of interaction among students and their facilitator within the teaching-learning environment (Dewey, 1938, p. 40). He further states that in order for an active learning process to be maintained, the facilitator must utilize student-centred teaching methodologies such as problem-based learning and case studies. These methods will encourage meaningful learning experiences that are relatable (Dewey, 1938).

Student-centeredness is characterized by a reduction in the extent of power that the teacher has over the teaching-learning process and students having ultimate responsibility for their learning (Horsfall, Cleary, & Hunt, 2012). This places students at the centre of the learning process and the instructor therefore serves as a facilitator who provides students with opportunities to learn independently and from one another (Wright, 2011). Additionally, a student-centred approach to teaching and learning aids in the development of critical thinking skills and higher order thinking which includes interpretation, analysis and synthesis (Clarke, 2010). There is increasing interest in student-centeredness in higher education, however, the term is often times overused and misunderstood (Wright, 2011). This paper applies the Avant and Walker model (2005), to analyse the concept of student-centeredness and its implications for nursing education and research. It seeks to critically examine the literature to: attain a better understanding of the concept; clarify the different uses of the concept; explore the qualities and characteristics of the
concept; give support to the understanding of the concept and promote focus of further research into student-centeredness in nursing education. The intention is to operationally define student-centeredness to guide research that will seek to analyse the teaching styles of nursing faculty, create awareness of the importance of a student-centred environment and ultimately develop strategies to remove the contextual hurdles and progress to a student-centred approach. Through extensive search of the literature, the critical attributes, the antecedents, consequences and various uses of the concept were explored. Empirical referents were then identified to further explicate the concept.

Uses of the Concept

The concept of student-centeredness has been explored and interpreted in many different ways throughout the literature. It has been defined as a process, social environment as well as a teaching methodology within different disciplines. The constructivists view student-centred learning as the principle of experiential learning. The instructor aims to create new knowledge and develop learning through practical activities supported by group discussions that will form the core of the students’ learning experience (Fosnot, 2013; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2012). Consistent with this view, student-centeredness was further described as a social environment that facilitates a foundation of trust between teacher and student. It was posited that this creates an opportunity for open dialogue consistent with exploration of issues. Consequently, the learner is forced to think critically and engage in critical reflection (Young & Paterson, 2007).

From a psychological perspective, Carl Rogers viewed student-centred learning as a process that involves the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and respect that is the most effective basis for learning in education. Rogers further theorized that a positive student-teacher relationship and learning atmosphere is greatly linked to comprehensive, holistic learning. Within the psychological school of thought, student-centeredness also emphasizes interaction with peers and the instructor and involves a sequence of activities that requires feedback and students are given the opportunity to apply their learning to the classroom setting (Armbruster et al., 2009). Student-centeredness in relation to curriculum design includes the idea that students are given the opportunity to not only choose what to study, but how and why that topic might be an interesting one to study (Lin, Chuang, & Hsu, 2014). This definition emphasizes the concept of students having “choice” in their learning. This view is supported by Mailloux (2006) who postulated that allowing students to determine their learning path, aids in their empowerment and where an element of choice is exercised, there is increased responsibility and
accountability. In relation to teaching methodologies, student-centeredness may be viewed as the utilization of methods that not only engage students but also forces them to think and develop problem solving skills. Methodologies such as active group discussions, case studies, interactive sessions, role plays and debates among others, are essential tools in keeping with the student-centred approach (Horsfall et al., 2012; Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, & Dochy, 2010). The concept may also be viewed as a method focusing on the needs of the student rather than on the knowledge being transmitted. This approach is characterized as a collaborative relationship between teacher and student where all participants are actively engaged in the process of learning (Horsfall et al., 2012).

**Defining Attributes**

The critical attributes of a concept are the characteristics that are common to all aspects of the concept being analysed (Walker & Avant, 2005). The critical attributes of student-centeredness include an active rather than passive learning process that is supported by inventive and flexible methods of teaching and students’ active engagement in the learning process. There is also collaboration and cooperation between the students and the teacher while students take full responsibility and shows accountability for their learning. The teacher also serves as a facilitator during the process of learning (Horsfall et al., 2012; Wright, 2011; Baeten et al., 2010; Clarke, 2010; Gelisli, 2009).

**Case Analysis**

Case analysis has been advanced by Avant and Walker (2005) as a critical component of concept analysis. Cases include those that accurately reflect the concept – model case; partially reflect the concept – borderline case; do not reflect the concept – contrary case. An example of each case is presented below.

**Model Case:** A teacher on the first day of the new school term has joined a class of 120 year two undergraduate nursing students. The teacher had years of teaching experience but the students were new to the course and the content to be presented. The teacher introduced herself and the topics to be completed as well as the objectives to be met for the session and for the rest of the semester. She displayed the title slide of the PowerPoint which had been prepared for the session but no content was shown to the members of the class. With the areas of ethical and legal issues in nursing to be taught, the teacher asked the students for their own definition of the terms presented. With a show of hands, the students began to answer. The teacher began to write each student’s definition of the term, giving them a visual idea of what they were thinking. These were then compared to the definition that the teacher had prepared beforehand from literature. Each definition had significant similarities and
identical key terms. After that introduction, the students were presented with a clinical scenario of which they had to identify the various ethical and legal principles being breached or maintained. They were asked to separate into small groups of ten to discuss the scenario and each group would present their case for five minutes. Each group was given the opportunity to discuss their own perspective and through open dialogue with the teacher and their colleagues, they constructed their own knowledge based on their level of active engagement and critical thinking skills. Following that discussion, students were then presented with a second scenario of an ethical dilemma and were asked to solve it in their individual groups. The students were able to detect and convey several means of solving the issues that were presented in the scenario. The teacher then offered students who needed further clarification, an opportunity to ask questions, which were discussed at length to ensure that each student understood the content.

This model case characterizes all the attributes of student-centeredness. The teacher based on her approach to teaching and learning used flexible methods of presenting the content to the students. The approach used was also inventive and she offered the students an opportunity to be independent in their thinking and create their own knowledge through group and open discussions about the topic while she facilitated the process. The process was also active as the students and teacher were actively engaged in the learning process. There was also evidence of cooperation and collaboration between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves, as they were able to arrive at a consensus through meaningful discussions with each other and the teacher, thus building their own knowledge and creating their own learning experience. She served as a facilitator as she prompted the students to ask questions after which she guided their understanding through their own thinking instead of instructing them and they took responsibility for their own learning.

**Borderline case:** Dr. Mary-Jil Jones, an experienced Educator, was teaching a class of 50 adult learners about the functions of the nervous system. She gave a PowerPoint presentation with the content after which she placed the students into groups of four and asked each group to state the function of the system to reinforce the content taught. Each group presented the information after discussion within their groups. The students were also prompted to ask questions to clarify information that was not clear while Dr. Jones facilitated the process.

This case depicts some of the attributes of the concept of student-centeredness. The students were actively engaged in the process through the group discussion and took responsibility for their learning in that situation. The students cooperated with the teacher during the reinforcement exercise. She served as a
facilitator as she prompted them to ask questions while she provided clarity. However, the teacher was not flexible in her approach to teaching as she used the power point presentation to teach the content and there was no collaboration between the teacher and the students.

**Contrary case:** Mrs. Jane Doe was teaching a group of adult learners a topic from the course: “Documentation in Nursing”. She displayed her power point slides and read the content to the students. The students sat quietly listening to Mrs. Doe’s lecture but did not ask any questions. After the session was completed, she told them the topic for the next session and dismissed the group of students. The teacher lacked flexibility in her approach to teaching the content and she used only the lecture mode to present the information. The students displayed no form of responsibility for their learning as the information was “fed” to them and the process of learning was passive rather than active. Both parties (teacher and students) were not actively engaged in the process of learning and there was no collaboration or grounds for cooperation between teacher and students and among the students themselves. The teacher played the role of an instructor and not a facilitator as she did not guide their understanding instead, she relied solely on the power point presentation.

**Antecedents**

Antecedents are the events or incidents that must occur prior to the occurrence of the concept. (Walker & Avant, 2005). In order for student-centeredness to occur within the teaching-learning environment, a foundation of trust must exist between the teacher and the students. Both teacher and students must be equally motivated and committed to the process. Additionally, there has to be a flexible, non-threatening environment created by the teacher that is viewed as supportive by the student (Wright, 2011).

The teacher must plan engaging learning activities to make the process of learning interesting and he/she must be able to see self as a facilitator, release the power of control and extend responsibilities to the students. Lastly, both parties must have confidence in their abilities. The teacher must feel secure to empower 121 students to create their own learning experience without being instructed. In addition the students must have confidence in their ability to build their own knowledge and accept the power of control over their learning (Baeten et al., 2010).

**Consequences**

Consequences are those events or incidents that occur as a result of the occurrence of the concept (Walker & Avant, 2005). The consequences of student-centeredness are multi-dimensional as it impacts students, facilitators and the institution. The student will have increased confidence level, improved critical
thinking and problem-solving skills, thus being better able to manage future challenges in healthcare situations. In addition, they will develop a greater sense of responsibility for their learning and more effective communication skills along with deeper learning (Gelisli, 2009). There is also an improvement in understanding content and a greater sense of satisfaction in learning (Martyn, Terwijn, Kek, & Huijser, 2014). Due to an environment of trust and collaboration being developed, there is enhancement in the learning milieu for students; fear and anxiety is reduced, simultaneously liberating the teacher from fear of failure (Horsfall et al., 2012). Additionally, the teacher may feel a greater sense of job satisfaction due to improvement in students’ learning and the institution will therefore produce competent graduates with better grades who possess greater scholarly prowess.

**Operational Definition**

Theoretical literature and the use of student-centeredness in varying paradigms have provided scope for operationalizing student-centeredness. These evidences point to student-centeredness as an active process that involves students and teachers collaborating and cooperating to create an active learning process. This involves active engagement of the students which is simultaneously supported by inventive and flexible teaching methods and guided by a facilitator.

**Empirical Referents**

Observations can be made to determine student-centeredness which includes actual observation of teaching styles by teachers and the students’ behaviour such as active engagement in the process of learning (Johnson-Farmer & Frenn, 2009). However, for objectivity in measuring the concept, the Principles of Adult Learning Scale (PALS) is a tool that was developed and validated by Gary Conti, a Professor of Adult Education in the United States of America. He created this tool as a means of objectively measuring the congruency between adult education practitioners, their classroom behaviour and expressed belief in the collaborative teaching-learning mode (Conti, 1979).

The instrument is divided into seven factors as well as learner-centred activities, assessing student’s needs and participation in learning process. This forty (40) item instrument was utilized in a descriptive, correlational study to analyze whether teaching styles were teacher-centred or student-centred. The tool specifically measured the frequency with which faculty members practiced teaching-learning methods based on the principles of adult learning (Schaefer & Zygmont, 2003).

Similarly, the Constructivist Learning Environment Survey (CLES) was developed to objectively assess the teaching approaches of faculty, by measuring congruency with the constructivist approach in the teaching-learning
environment. This tool was modified by Johnson & McLure in 2004 (Nix, Fraser & Ledbetter, 2005). The plausibility of the tool was established in small-scale classroom-based qualitative studies and its statistical integrity and robustness were validated in large-scale studies conducted in the USA and Australia (Nix, Fraser & Ledbetter, 2005). This twenty-eight (28) item tool was used to determine students’ perception of the classroom learning environment in a 2010 study conducted at an undergraduate nursing institution. The study’s aim was to explore the relationship between teaching approaches and critical thinking in a nursing foundation course (Baeten, 2010).

**Implications for Nursing Research**

Research is the first step toward identifying and exploring the concept of student-centeredness and how this can impact students, teachers and institutions. There is need for a shift toward a student-centred approach to teaching and learning in higher education, however, extensive research needs to be done so that this approach can be effectively and appropriately implemented. The transfer of nursing into higher education settings in the Caribbean (Rukholm, Barclay, Hewitt, Anderson-Johnson & Dover-Roberts, 2010) has increased the demand for students to engage higher order thinking during the teaching-learning process. Research would inform best practices in developing a student-centred curriculum in higher education. Research is also necessary for the development of a framework through which SC may be systematically clarified and investigated. Such a framework is likely to offer evidence through which a student-centred teaching-learning approach can be implemented.

Given growing clinical complexities and the corresponding complexities in patient care needs, institutions are required to adequately prepare students with the necessary skills e.g. critical thinking skills. Consequently, research can also be done to further explore the effects of the student-centred approach on optimal, holistic nursing care and to identify issues associated with implementation of a student-centred model within the Caribbean setting.

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