



Developing Learner-Centered Teaching: A Practical Guide for Faculty

by Phyllis Blumberg, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009

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It's been my practice for several years to spend time over the summer working on my teaching. I am always interested in trying new approaches that keep the work fresh and interesting while improving the learning experience for students. One of the ways I work on my teaching is by looking for ideas in books and articles I hear about from colleagues or from the listservs I subscribe to.

This summer, for the first time in more than a decade, I taught a summer session course. Not only was this the first time I'd ever taught the course (qualitative research methods) in a compressed format, it was also the first time I had taught any course using a blended in-class and on-line approach. It was a fun and very worthwhile experience, but it was also so intense that I am just now in early July getting around to my summer teaching enhancement activities.

And what better place to start than with Phyllis Blumberg's exciting new book, *Developing Learner-Centered Teaching*? I had attended a workshop with Maryellen Weimer a couple years ago, and have been an aficionado of learner-centered teaching for even longer than that. In spite of my familiarity with this approach, I found Blumberg's book a very nice refresher—and its workbook features (such as a course development activity at the end of every chapter) are really providing a focus for my efforts to tune up the sociology of organizations course I am scheduled to teach for the seventh time in the fall 2009 semester.

Author Phyllis Blumberg is Director of the Teaching and Learning Center and a professor of social sciences and education at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. In writing *Developing Learner-Centered Teaching* she draws upon more than three decades of experience as a faculty development professional and twenty-five years of classroom teaching.

Developing Learner-Centered Teaching is very much about the "how" rather than the "why" of this approach. It appears to be aimed primarily at experienced college teachers who have already had some exposure to the concept and who have accepted its underlying rationale. The use of the word "practical" in the subtitle is totally apropos. Blumberg is the ultimate pragmatist, giving her reader permission to exercise complete discretion over how much learner-centeredness to introduce and in what dimensions of a course, freely acknowledging that not all courses are amenable to this approach and correctly observing that local cultural norms can and must have an influence on the implementation process, as well.

Blumberg has organized the course makeover process around a relatively complex five-part rubric, corresponding to five dimensions of learner-centered teaching: the function of content, the role of the instructor, responsibility for learning, the purposes and processes of assessment, and the balance of power. Each of these parts contains a number of components; for example, the assessment rubric has seven components, including peer and self-assessment, justification of the accuracy of answers, and timeframe for feedback. For each of these components, the rubric provides a brief explanation of an approach an instructor would take along a four-part continuum from instructor-centered to fully learner-centered.

A few summers ago, I read Stevens and Levi's *Introduction to Rubrics* (Stylus Publishing, 2005) and have since developed quite a few of these forms to use for assessing student performance on graded assignments in all my classes. I had not previously considered using a rubric of the complexity presented here, but I found it workable if I approached each part separately.

I have two complaints about *Developing Learner-Centered Teaching*. One is its size (it has the dimensions of a sheet of standard typing paper and runs about an inch thick) and weight (at least five pounds). In part this is a function of the book's very large type and wide margins. I wouldn't want to carry it around in my backpack, and reading it while sitting on the couch is a challenge, especially since its soft covers leave it lacking in self-support. To have an optimal reading experience, I have to sit at a table or desk where the flat surface supports all that weight!

My second complaint is related to the first. *Developing Learner-Centered Teaching* is full of forms that can be used to retool a single course, to assess learner-centeredness across a curriculum, or to conduct formative or summative faculty teaching evaluations. In my enthusiasm, I began filling out the forms that appeared at the end of the chapters. About the time I reached Chapter 3, "Tools for Facilitating Change and Assessment," I realized that I would need multiple copies of the forms in order to use them for multiple courses. Although I could photocopy the pages in the appendix, the book's binding would make that difficult; plus I would rather have the forms in a word processing file so that I can fill them out on my computer and not by hand. What if I wanted to include them in my next personnel review portfolio? I think the publisher would have done the author and readers a service if these forms were made available on a password-protected website or were provided on a CD bundled with the book. Either of these approaches would have reduced the length of the book and thus its unwieldy size and weight.