

## Student-centred Learning and Skills for Life

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### Introduction

In a recent edition of Pacific Curriculum Network (PCN), student-centred learning (SCL) was presented as a major focus in many internationally funded development projects. The student-centred approach can be and often is interpreted differently according to the educational philosophy at play, and social-cultural and political contexts in which teaching and learning take place. In primary education, it seems easier for teachers to incorporate SCL approaches through play activities, though this is by no means consistent in many developing countries where young children still learn by rote memorisation and silent copying into notebooks. Beyond primary school or basic education, SCL is even rarer. More than ever, students at this level in poorer countries rely on traditional teaching, often because schools are poorly resourced and teachers cannot cope with comprehensive teaching methodologies.

Before pursuing the question of why SCL is promoted in development projects, I examine a recent international study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), showing some success where SCL is incorporated into teaching.

### PISA and learner characteristics

South Pacific readers may know that 15-year-old students in New Zealand and Australia did extremely well on the OECD study Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>1</sup>. It assessed young people's capacity to use their

knowledge and skills in order to meet real life challenges" (OECD 2002).

The study was conducted in 32 countries, mostly European, plus USA, Canada, 2 Asian and 2 South American countries, and Australia and New Zealand. The latter two were among the top scorers in all tests, and New Zealand students were in first place for the number completing PISA's hardest reading tasks.

PISA deserves a separate article but the point here, in regard to SCL, is that "students who report that they learn cooperatively tend to do better than those who do not" (OECD 2002:16). The report also notes that students who reported learning through competitive strategies also did well, which seems to suggest that cooperative and competitive learning are able to complement each other in certain situations.

It is also noteworthy that in most countries, female students were more likely to report that they take control of their own learning "which is a strategy that tends to be associated with learning success" (OECD 2002:18). Overall, female students did better than males in reading; in half of the countries they did better than males in mathematics and in 3 countries better than males in science. Therefore, student-control of learning needs to be analysed carefully and promoted appropriately.

What this might suggest for countries where new approaches to teaching and learning are being promoted is that it should be easier for teachers to adopt a complementary package of strategies rather than making an 'either-or' choice.

### **Why promote student-centred teaching-learning in development projects?**

A previous PCN article highlighted the emphasis that SCL receives in international projects, assisted technically and financially by major funding agencies. Student-centred learning and life skills, are seen as related in the development of civic democracies. The World Bank (2001), quoting the Plowden Report says:

Children will need to be capable of ... learning the new skills called for by the changing economic scene ... and understand that in a democratic society each individual has obligations to the community, as well as rights within it.

It speaks of education as enabling people to take an active part in democracy, not just through voting but through making their voice heard at work and in the community. Therefore, effective schooling means equipping people with skills and knowledge which go beyond academic achievement and to encompass the responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

One could say there is a clear connection between the promotion of democracy and effective classroom learning, of which Combs (1976) said:

... the atmosphere should facilitate the exploration of meaning ... learners must feel safe and accepted ... understand both the risks and rewards of seeking new knowledge and understanding ... provide for involvement, interaction and socialisation.

Good governance, transparency and civic responsibilities promoted by UN organisations require people who understand what is going on in society, who are free to speak out on issues, and who know how to bring about change. Though it is not the role of education to bring about social change, young people can develop the skills to do so if given opportunities to think, discover and apply knowledge in appropriate and positive ways in their daily lives for the benefit of their wider society. This is where SCL comes into the picture. There is an extensive body of literature on student- and teacher-centred learning; a few selections are given here to show how a link can be made between student-centred learning and problem-solving in civil society.

### **SCL and problem-solving in the child's world**

Traditional approaches, especially in science teaching, have been criticised for ignoring children's prior experiences and knowledge. The teacher-centred method of teaching has been described as a transmission approach assuming "a body of knowledge about the world that distinguishes between right and wrong explanations and that can be transmitted to children by a sufficiently authoritative teacher" (Kirkwood 1991).

Fleer, Corra and Newman (1996:47) contrast formal learning and set rules with play, where children set the rules which enable them to "incorporate their world into their learning experiences". Earlier, Vygotsky (1978:11) described children's play evolving from games of "overt imaginary situations and covert rules, to games of overt rules and covert imaginary situations". In other words, children develop the rules to fit the dimensions of their activity. This development of rules in play is carried over to real life activities, whether they happen to be in

the classroom, at home, or in the community.

If we accept these connections between SCL and the promotion of civic principles, it follows that teachers and curriculum advisers could rightly argue that SCL is good in itself. It makes sense that learners are given frequent opportunities to confront new experiences. It makes sense that learners discover patterns of behaviour, patterns of probability, models in nature and society for utilisation and adaptation. It makes sense that learners try to discover reasons for what they observe, and that learners as part of society judge what is good and just in human interaction, rather than accepting what is dictated from above. The type of learning which has students at the centre, is modeled on these principles. The question for many countries remains: what will such changes to teaching and learning mean to the civil society in the long run? — a question of hope.

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<sup>1</sup> NOTE: Apart from Australia and New Zealand, South Pacific countries did not take part in PISA 2000.