

Student Accountability in Student-Centered Learning

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Student accountability as a term is a very difficult to define due to its broad use and having the different meanings to the different users of the term. Some may hear ‘student accountability’ and conclude that the discussion is on the very real politics of education inclusive of divisive issues like the No Child Left Behind Act, vouchers to offset public school taxes, and complicated measures of system effectiveness like student assessment. One thinker has even attempted to categorize the notion of accountability along different evolutionary stages (McDaniel, 2009). While these are important, I wish to limit the discussion to the aspect of student accountability from the learner’s perspective; the student. Oddly, some texts that discuss student accountability, even from the perspective I am interested in, consider the student last in the overall assessment planning succumbing to many institutional concerns (Dugan, 2004). By definition, accountability is, “the willingness to accept responsibility for one’s actions” (Merriam-Webster, 2010). The application of the idea of student accountability to the definition of the later makes more sense than the aforementioned notions.

In looking at student accountability, I do not wish to dismiss the roles of teachers. In much of the literature, the need for a skilled teacher in any subject matter was prevalent. The role they play at-large in education is beyond the scope of this review. What makes for good teaching or good teachers has been a concern for a considerable part of time. Even in the early 1900’s, philosophers have sought to best pass on the knowledge of the past to the survivors of the present all while cognizant that they did not necessarily have it right (Dewey, 1916) (Dewey, 1998). Other early thinkers considered student accountability as well. In reflecting on the work of William James, Zoch states, “that the learner ... creates his success or failure by his own actions and the management of his thoughts (2004).

In examining what I was interested in about student accountability, I feel that topics like student-centered learning and student ownership for learning are either synonymous with the type of student accountability that is my research interest or contribute to it. One of many definitions of student-centered learning is, “a process where much of the power during the experience resides with students” (Estes, 2004). Additionally, a more simplistic definition may be, “Student-centered instruction is a form of active learning where students are engaged and involved in what they are studying” (Brown, 2008). However simple, I would prefer the word process or environment versus instruction in the last definition since it seems to take away from the aim of

this method of learning. At the college level, what does the literature say about student accountability from a student-centered or student ownership perspective?

A myriad of approaches to educating students exist throughout academia and are far too numerous to catalogue. Enhancing student accountability is just one of many approaches that educators have either considered or are including in the design of learning systems. Shupe argues that student accountability is one of four contexts that coexist and institutions need to be able to satisfy all of them to some level in order to function (2008). In examining student accountability or student ownership, several methods of instruction claim to enhance this. The classroom, teacher-driven learning model no longer predominates, and the accountability for ensuring learning occurs is shifting to the student (Porter-O'Grady, 2001).

Effect on Accountability

Two immediate effects or outcomes of student-centered learning are, “the learner has full responsibility for her/his learning,” and, “involvement and participation are necessary for learning” (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005, p. 28). Despite the learning discipline or level, theorists are increasingly finding that, “[student] involvement in the process increases student ownership” (Schwimmer & Hester, 2008).

“When made available to learners, explicit statements of intended outcomes encourage clarity and ownership. Learners are able to take charge of their own learning to a much greater extent, and indeed to take part in the discussions as to what they should be expected to achieve.” (Ellis, 1995, p. 85).

Students’ perceptions to the approach were characterized in a study comparing student-centered learning to the traditional or conventional approaches. Along with other helpful outcomes, Felder states that active learning, a part of student-centered learning, “assures both positive interdependence and individual accountability” (Felder, 2010).

This type of learning environment is not out of reach of student comprehension. When studied researchers found that students had clear perceptions about what student-centered learning was and were able to characterize it along many aspects of learning (see table below) (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003).

Aspect of learning/teaching	Student-centered approach	Conventional approaches
Student body	Caters to heterogeneous student population and individual student needs	Caters to homogenous student population and lowest common denominator
Mode of teaching	Active – lectures more interactive, group work, getting the student to think, be creative, facilitates retention	Passive – lectured at, little group work, student replicates what they have been told, lost from memory once regurgitated

Responsibility	Students more responsible for and in control of their own learning, become more independent, personal accountability, an empowering process	Staff responsible for making the student learn, remains dependent on the teacher
Motivation	More motivating due to formulation of personal learning objectives and cycle of constructive feedback	Less motivating due to working someone else's agenda and little or no feedback

Lea, et al (2003)

Of particular interest is that the student-centered approach, in addition to the other selected outcomes of it, is that responsibility to learn was the student's. This 'responsibility' is synonymous with the definition of accountable (Merriam-Webster, 2010). An important implication for student accountability may be present. de Cremer, et al, found that, "accountability implies that people's behavior may be constrained to some degree as they expect that their behavior may be linked to the person they are" (2001, p. 95). This implication may be positive in that with the ownership, in a student-centered environment, the student may choose to behave more appropriately since they want to be perceived by those who surround them in a certain way. Alternatively, a student may miss an opportunity to either demonstrate their participation or learning by avoiding participatory behaviors in a classroom. We can recognize that different systems of learning will have some risks. Student-centered learning is not without these concerns, and critiques.

Critiques and Concerns

One objection to the transfer of ownership from teacher to student is that it may be perceived as a threat (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986). Instead of looking at it from that perspective, it might instead be looked at as an opportunity for someone with that knowledge of a particular subject to aid in the transfer or acquiring in a method that is better for the students. Chiefly what is different than in the old, traditional model is that the students have more choice in the 'what' that is learned. Estes argues that even programs or environments billed as 'student-centered' are really teacher-centered in guise and calls educators to evaluate what their program really is (2004). This is cause for concern especially when branding education as a product for consumption by students and other stakeholders. O'Neil and McMahon identify other concerns as well: the risk of catering to each individual may make programming education difficult; resources in some geographic or even educational environments may be scarce; and students may not be able to adjust to a student-centered learning environment (2005). For some individuals, risk of participation has been found in social dilemmas (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). While student-centered learning does not explicitly require social learning, any social activity designed around

a social construct may negatively affect some students (de Cremer et al, 2001). Most of these concerns are addressed by the authors. What is apparent from an examination of several sources of criticism though is that no system is going to be perfect.

Recommendations

Considering both the philosophical opposition to student-centered learning and the limited quantitative research in the body of educational knowledge, I recommend that further research be done which isolates where possible the effect on student accountability in student-centered learning environments. In addition, student accountability should, as a matter of comparison, be measured in other teaching methodologies.

Conclusion

Student accountability for learning, regardless of the methodology used to achieve it, seems like it should be a 'no-brainer' idea. Student-centered learning clearly has the potential promote or increase desirable outcomes like student accountability. Before dismissing it as a methodology, instructors, teachers, and administrators need to familiarize themselves with and then carefully examine the methodology for its usefulness in increasing student accountability in learning environments.

A final thought that I wish to express is that when exploring the research and data surrounding student accountability in vocational learning environments, I was astonished to see the amount of research that originates from the nursing field and how little from the balance of the medical profession at large. This also offers promise that there are opportunities to focus on student accountability in other learning environments than traditional schooling.

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Annotated Bibliography

Diefenbeck, C., Plowfield, A. & Herrman, J. (2006). Clinical immersion: A residency model for nursing education. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 27(2), 72-79.

The authors describe a new model of nurse residency training and education that was implemented where one of the products was increased student accountability. Education, even in vocational environments, that fosters accountability on the part of the student is valuable. The methods used to achieve that accountability were not easily distinguishable as student-centered although there were strong elements of experiential learning.

Gomez, D. (2008). Women's proper place and student-centered pedagogy. *Studies in Philosophy & Education*, 27(5), 313-333.

The author presents a counter argument that student-centered learning is feminist when comparing traditional approaches to a masculine form of education. Gomez's dissatisfaction is that practitioners of student-centered learning are on the sidelines which should be contrary to contemporary feminist thought since women should not be on the sidelines.

Hassel, H. & Lourey, J. (2005). The dea(r)th of student accountability. *College Teaching*, 53(1), 2-13.

This study and recommendation claims that student accountability is undermined by factors like: instructors at the college level acting improperly with assessment and students behaviors such as absenteeism and apathy. The article recommends an institutional reawakening to remedy these problems they claim are the death of student accountability.

Huisman, J. & Currie, J. (2004). Accountability in higher education: Bridge over troubled water? *Higher Education*, 48, 4, 529-551. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4151570>

This article establishes frameworks for understanding the rise of the notion of accountability in higher education. Despite an attractive title, the authors were more concerned with the environment surrounding the accountability of the instructor, education entity and teaching profession.

James, W. (1918). *Principles of psychology* (Vol. 1 – p. 234). New York: Henry Holt & Co.

James, prominent person in the field of psychology, provides a detailed description of the workings of the human mind. James was cited by a work used in the review.

Jones, R. (2008). The "why" of class participation: A question worth asking. *College Teaching*, 53(1), 59-63.

This article provides suggestions to towards types of questions to ask that further student accountability and engagement in a lecture-format classroom. No mention of student-centered learning was present in the article. Methods described seemed to have face validity towards their aim of engagement even if temporarily.

Occhipinti, J. (2003). Active and accountable: Teaching comparative politics using cooperative team learning. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 36(1), 69-74.

This article contains the theme of increasing student accountability among others in a particular setting that may be considered student-centered. The methodology of increasing accountability on the student's part would have increased the scope of the review considerably.

Scott, J. (2009). Student ownership of education: Practicing democracy in schools. *Education Canada*, 49(2), 36-38.

The author of this article explores experiential learning with a focus on citizenship in Canadian grade schools. Based on promoting involvement with citizenship processes in schools, students demonstrate ownership and commitment through representative participation. That is if students are not directly participating, but feel nevertheless represented in the process, they will feel ownership. This was interesting because the application to learning was it was not to a traditional classroom or class, but a school as an overall learning community/environment.

Wright, M. & van der Mars, H. (2004). Blending assessment into instruction: Practical applications and meaningful results. *JOPERD*, 75(9), 29-33.

The authors address student accountability from a perspective of using frequent in-class assessment to achieve accountability. They claim that its use will lead to higher engagement and better outcomes for multiple stakeholders. The authors provided examples for how to score tasks associated with mastery of particular sport skills.

Yazerdijon, A. & Kohkhorst, B. (2007). Implementing small-group activities in large lecture classes. *College Teaching*, 55(4), 164-169.

Research suggests that small group activity as a subset of a larger group enables student accountability for their learning to increase. The sample size of the research appeared small and the results therefore difficult to generalize across different class-size environments. Further, much of the data collected in the study showed respondents providing middle-of-the road responses on the Likert Scale they used.