

Improving classrooms and classroom learning

Classrooms are the influential site in creating achievement at school. They have their impact not through particular predetermined teacher practices but through the learning climate they create. Classroom practices therefore make sense in terms of the climate to which they contribute and should be chosen with that in mind. When classrooms create a thoughtful and learner-centred climate, achievement is high.

When it comes to improving classrooms, the dominant approaches focus on the teacher's techniques. They attempt to do "more of what works", where "what works" has been decided from a reductionist analysis of teaching. As a result they often create more of the same - teacher-directed classrooms with low agency for learners.

Classroom improvement which enhances learning requires two consecutive shifts:
from teacher-centred towards learner-centred
and then towards learning-centred classrooms.

These two shifts are consecutive because attempts to accelerate the process and move directly from teacher-centred classrooms to learning-centred classrooms usually entail the imposition of a teacher-centred language of learning. Research since the 1970s has shown that this does not have the intended positive effects¹. It is an example of what learning-oriented researchers have called a "lethal mutation" of their findings². This describes the process which often occurs when practices which have been developed in learning-centred classrooms are subsequently packaged and promoted: they become teacher-centred practices, omit the principles of learning, and lose their positive effects.

The shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred has been described³ along three dimensions:

- more active learning, so that learners are not merely more active through creating, deciding, and so on, but are also more actively learning through the explicit review of their experience and the meaning-making this involves
- more collaborative learning, so that learners come to see themselves and others as resources in meaning-making, rather than teacher being sole fount of knowledge
- more learner-driven learning, so that learners come to drive the agenda through generating questions, organise inquiry and evaluate their own products and progress

When these three dimensions are present to some extent in a classroom, it becomes possible to address a fourth:

- more learning about learning, so that learners come to see themselves as such, develop authentic language about their experiences of learning, and come to propose improvements for how their learning can be developed.

If learning-centred change is applied to a classroom which does not have a degree of learner-centredness, the change will not stick.



Which aspects of the above argument make sense to you?

Chose one detailed point and one big-picture point to discuss with a colleague.

¹ Brown, A.L. (1994). "The advancement of learning." *Educational Researcher* 23(8): 4-12.

² Brown, A.L. and Campione, J.C. (1996). Psychological theory and the design of innovative learning environments: on procedures, principles, and systems in Schauble, L. and Glaser, R. Eds *Innovations In Learning: New Environments for Education*. Hillsdale NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

³ Watkins, C., Carnell, E. and Lodge, C. (2007). *Effective Learning in Classrooms*. London: Sage.
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