

LEARNER-CENTERED TEACHING APPROACH A PARADIGM SHIFT IN THAI EDUCATION

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Abstract

Mandated by the National Education Act enacted in 1999, the mighty wave of educational reform that swept across the nation in the same year has been making considerable headway in replacing the much condemned “**teacher-centered teaching approach**” with “**learner-centered approach**” that has been gaining widespread acceptance and popularity in many countries as a more powerful and more effective educational practice. Thousands and thousands of schoolteachers across the nation have been retrained, and still many more are awaiting to be retrained how to use this new approach in their classrooms. Today, five years after the most ambitious educational reform efforts in this country, “*Karn-rien karn-sorn thi yued phurien pen soon-klang*” in Thai (meaning “learner-centered teaching and learning”) has

entered as one of the prominent and most frequently used phrases among Thai educators although most people outside of education still do not have the slightest idea of what it really means.

The message is so loud and clear to all schoolteachers (including university professors and lecturers a well) in this country that it is now the time for them to completely stop using the “**teacher-centeredness**,” the mindless educational practice that has been damaging Thai education for several decades. Teachers have to change. To survive and advance in their profession, they must demonstrate that they are fully competent to teach and are actually teaching according to the student-centered approach. For those old-timers who still found themselves so comfortable with teacher-centeredness they have been using all their teaching life and unwilling to change, their prospects of making a

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difference in the teaching profession is likely to be gloomy at a time of paradigm shift in Thai education.

This article reviews why learner-centered educational practice has been increasingly gaining so much acceptance among Thai educators as well as educational reformers, and why the traditional teacher-centered approach has been widely blamed for educational mediocrity and social and economic illness in this country today.

Learner-centeredness: its origin development

The origin of learning-centered approach and using it as a framework to guide educational reform can be traced back to 80s when the United States initiated its first educational reform in response to “**A Nation At Risk**,” an influential document (published in 1983 by U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education) that exposed the slipping educational standards, deteriorating teaching quality, and declining academic achievement among American children and strongly argued the need for educational reform. The first reform efforts were directed at reforming the educational standards, the content, and the teachers. Teachers were made accountable for the learning outcomes; learners were ignored in the reform efforts. By the beginning of 90’s the first educational reform was found to be seriously flawed for having used the wrong framework for reform. This resulted in the need for a shift in the reform framework. To provide the needed framework to guide further reform decisions, American Psychological Association [APA] Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education and Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory [McREL] jointly developed “**The Learners-Centered Psychological Principles**” in 1990 to 1993

(subsequently revised in 1995 by APA Board of Educational Affairs).

The revised version of *The Learner-Centered Psychological Principles* (published in 1997) contains 14 psychological principles that deal with the learner and the learning. Although the learner-centered principles are developed in the U.S. by American researchers they can be considered as universal principles applicable to all learners in different cultures. The exact correspondence between the learner-centered psychological principles developed by APA and their Thai counterparts developed by Thai Educational Reform Committee clearly supports the universality of these principles. These principles are examined in the next section.

Learner-Centeredness: what it is?

One important reason why **learner-centeredness** is getting so popular among educators today is that it provides a rich assortment of creative teaching, learning, and assessment strategies that motivate and enhance learning. To educators, learner-centeredness is a model of effective educational psychology carried out in the United States and elsewhere have greatly contributed to the credibility and acceptance learner-centeredness.

The American experience in educational reform since 1983 has obviously served as invaluable guidelines for Thai educational reform efforts initiated 16 years later in 1999. The development of learner-centered psychological principles by the Americans to guide their educational reform efforts was, perhaps, the most important contribution to the reform efforts of their Thai counterpart.

The APA's learner-centered psychological principles are actually the *psychological factors* that impact human learning, and APA has grouped these principles into those dealing with (1) cognitive and metacognitive factors, (2) motivational and affective factors, (3) developmental and social factors, and (4) individual differences factors. Also, some of these factors are internal factors (under the control of learner) and some are external or contextual factors. These four groups of factors discuss what the learner-centered teachers and their students should be doing in the classrooms.

Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors

The cognitive and metacognitive factors deal with the learning process. The learner-centered teachers prepare their students to become autonomous and life-long learners who assume personal responsibility for their own learning by helping them to engage avidly in intentional, active, goal-directed, and self-regulated learning; promote meaningful learning and understanding of new materials by helping their students activate their prior knowledge base and actively link, connect, or relate new knowledge to this knowledge base to ensure that they would be able to apply what they have learned to new situations or to their own life in the real-world contexts.

Recognizing the importance of integrating with existing knowledge base in meaningful learning of new materials, teachers also help their students develop strategic learning skills needed in seeking and integrating new knowledge.

Also, the learner-centered teachers help their students develop metacognitive (high-order, creative, and critical thinking) strategies

that will enable them to monitor and control their own thinking or mental activities in acquiring, integrating, and using knowledge.

In addition, teachers also develop the students ability to use the information and computer technology (ICT) in learning or updating their knowledge about the latest developments in specific fields of study. Besides, teachers also design the learning contexts that encourage their students to appreciate, value, and actively seek local wisdom, talents, and knowledge developed and accumulated over time and available in their own communities.

Motivational and Affective Factors

Learner-centered teachers know how to motivate their students to learn. Since motivation enhance student learning, teachers should promote what promote students' motivation (such as curiosity, feeling good about oneself, self-esteem, and self-confidence) and emotional security, and eliminate what destroy their motivation such as negative emotions (intense anxiety, worries, feeling of incompetence, fear of failure). Moreover, since students' efforts and persistence on learning tasks are influenced by intrinsic motivation to learn, teachers should make learning tasks interesting, meaningful, personally relevant, novel, authentic, and sufficiently complex and challenging to promote intrinsic motivation to learn.

Developmental and Social Factors

Learner-centered teachers know how to design learning materials appropriate to the level of cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development of their students. In addition, teachers also aware of the developmental

differences that exist among the students and create appropriate learning contexts so that the students can learn best. Developmentally appropriate, intrinsically interesting and meaningful, personally relevant, and sufficiently challenging learning tasks promote high level of performance among the students.

Moreover, learner-centered teachers recognize that knowledge is both individually as well as socially constructed and also contextualized. To provide effective social construction of knowledge, teachers design sharing, caring, and nurturing classroom settings that promote social interactions, collaborations, cooperation, mutual respect, a sense of belonging, and tolerance for diversity that would lead to social and emotional competence and to the development of community of learning where every student enjoys and actively participate in the learning process.

Also, because of the contextualized nature of knowledge, what the students learned in one context may not be applicable to totally different contexts. Learner-centered teachers, therefore, provide authentic contexts of learning so that their students will be able to apply what they have learned in one context to other identical real-world contexts. Moreover, learner-centered teachers help their students to develop themselves into resourceful and flexible learners who can learn anywhere, anyplace, anytime, and under any condition, and do not confine their learning only within the classroom walls or within school libraries.

Individual Differences Factors

Learner-centered teachers recognize individual differences that exist in learning capabilities and in learning styles among their students, and also the influences of linguistics,

ethnic, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic diversities on learning school subject Teachers, therefore, accommodate student diversities by designing appropriate learning contexts that allow for constantly adjusting their teaching and assessment strategies and learning materials.

In addition, learner-centered teachers recognize that standards and assessments are integral parts of effective learning and teaching process because they provide feedback and important information for making on-going improvement of teaching and learning process. Learning standards should be high enough to demand serious works from students. Also, assessment procedures should include both teacher-implemented performance assessments as well on-going self-assessments carried out by each student to monitor his or her own learning. Teachers help their students to develop self-assessment skills as a part of preparing the students to become autonomous and life-long learners.

Learning Reform as The Heart of Educational Reform in Thailand

In the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis that hit Thailand in 1996, public dissatisfaction against the Thai education system has been growing and many people bitterly blamed the failing education as responsible for the nation's worst economic and financial crises in decades and demanded immediate major education reform to cure the nation's economic and social illness and rebuild global competitiveness.

What Has Gone Wrong with Thai Education?

Listening to how Professor Prawase Wasi, a medical doctor by training and highly

respected across the nation as one of the greatest thinkers and educators and also the man who headed two Sub-Committees on Learning Reform (one for National Education Commission, and another for the Ministry of Education) has been lamenting over the serious shortcomings of Thai education would give a clear picture of what have gone wrong with Thai education today, and why education reform should start with reforming how Thai children learn and how Thai teachers teach at school.

In his book *“Educational Reform: Intellectual Reengineering as the Way to Survive National Disaster”* (published in 1998 in Thai) Professor Prawase, has bluntly put the existing Thai education system as “pushing the country into disaster,” and urgent reform is imperative to avoid such disaster.

According to Professor Prawase, Thai society is imbedded in “power culture” and this is reflected in the highly teacher-centered teaching approaches adopted by most Thai teachers. Teacher-centered teachers sway great power and control in the classroom. They consider themselves as the storehouse of knowledge and their students merely empty vessels to be filled with knowledge from teachers. As the teachers are experts in what they are teaching and the students are just complete novices or empty vessels, students are not supposed to question or challenge their teachers’ ideas or thinking. Ideal students are supposed to be docile, easy to mold, easy to teach, easy to manage, and completely submissive to their teachers’ power and control.

Furthermore, teacher-centered teachers view their students as suitable, identical units of raw material to be transformed or molded into standardized, quality-inspected, units of identical finished products out of the factory

assembly line. They fail to recognize that their students are unique human beings with individual differences and that no two human beings are identical.

In addition, the teacher-centered teachers decide what their students should learn, and invariably use direct teaching methods to impart their knowledge to their students who are sitting quietly as recipients of knowledge. These teachers’ methods strongly promote rote or parrot learning, the kind of learning that the students commit the materials into memory without understanding. To do well in the tests and examinations, the students are expected to parrot back the materials from memory.

As students find themselves with more and more materials to rote-learn or memorize beyond their memory capacity, the school learning becomes too stressful, boring, and no longer enjoyable to them. Also, their motivation to learn are gone as they get into troubles with their teachers and parents for their doing poorly in the school.

Also, teacher-centered teaching approach can also be viewed as “content-centered” or “subject matters-centered” teaching approach as the teachers are too preoccupied with covering the content prescribed in the curriculum to pay any attention to how well the students are learning the materials. The teachers would race quickly through their lectures or textbooks to cover the content allotted in their lesson plans before the bell rings. As failing to cover the content is considered as a job not well done, covering the content, not the student learning, has become an important duty for the content-centered teachers.

No doubt, all the gloom and doom pictures of teacher-centered educational

practices that have been dominating Thai education for decades have led to highly-respected intellectual like Professor Prawase and many other Thais to go frantic and alarmed at the increasing number of Thai children who have completed their schooling could not read and write well (even in Thai, their own native language. Leave alone English, the lingua franca of globalized age), could not think creatively or critically, could not put their knowledge to creative practical applications in real-world contexts outside of classroom, could not do learning how to learn, could not do life-long learning, and could not function effectively as productive and contributing members in the fast changing Thai society.

Moreover, alarming rates of anti-social behaviors among Thai teenagers (such as drug abuse, premarital sex, teenage pregnancies, illicit abortions, teenage crime and violence, teenage prostitution, lack of interest in religion, lack of interest in schoolwork, and lack of respect for parents and the elderly, lack of nationalism, and rebellion against the established Thai values and customs) together with the growing moral and social decay in all sectors of Thai society (such as rampant corruption among the politicians; exploitation of the poor by the rich; worsening rural poverty, rampant violations of human rights; and the growing political violence, urban crime, child labor, divorce rates, human trafficking, and number of children born out of wedlock) are also believed to have their root causes in failing education.

What should be done to stop Thai education from regressing further into mediocrity? As proposed by Professor Prawase in 1998, an intellectual reengineering

(meaning a complete restructuring of Thai education) is what should be done without delay to stop this nation from heading towards utter economic, social, political, cultural, and moral disasters.

The enactment of the National Education Act in 1999 that makes educational reform mandatory, and the subsequent implementation of learning reform in the same year is then the first and crucial step taken towards a complete restructure of Thai education

The learning reform to remove teacher-centeredness from continuing to transform Thai children into rote learners or mindless parrots who are unable to use their knowledge after completing their schooling is imperative and timely.

Teacher-Centeredness is Out Learner-Centeredness is In

After teacher-centeredness has been identified as what has been plaguing Thai education for decades until the nation finally plunged into deep economic and financial crises in 1996, educational reformers and educators in this country have started to remove it promptly from Thai education through learning reform implemented in 1999 and replace it with learner-centeredness.

Based on many success stories released periodically by the Office of National Economic Commission charged with the responsibility of implementing education reform efforts, learning reform has been making considerable headway as more and more teachers nationwide are switching over to learning-centered teaching approaches.

Why is Learning Reform at the Heart of Education Reform?

From what have been discussed so far, the main objective of present educational reform is to replace teacher-centered model of teaching that no longer serve the needs of Thai education well anymore with learner-centered model that will serve the needs better.

The reason why learning reform is at the heart of education reform, the view firmly maintained by the Sub-Committees on Learning Reform of the Thai National Education Commission and The Thai Ministry of Education, is based on the view that the learners are the most important players in education. Not the teachers, not the school administrators, and definitely not the bricks or school buildings, or tables and chairs in the classroom. The jobs of teachers and school administrators, including other school personnel, are to provide all the supports needed for the students to learn best. The quality of student learning is then the measure of how well the teachers, the administrators, and school personnel have been doing their job. Likewise, the functions of the curriculum, school buildings, and other physical facilities are to support the student learning. These are definitely needed, but their importance is not high above that of students.

As learners and their learning are at center of all educational endeavors, learning reform that will enable the learners to learn better or improve their quality of learning is then the heart of educational reform. Curriculum reform, teachers reform, school administrators reform, and other areas of educational reform are to revolve around learning reform. And at the center of learning reform are the learners, the most important players in education.

Disillusioned with Learner-Centeredness

Despite continued reports nationwide on successful classroom applications of the learner-centered approach by teachers of all grade levels, some teachers in the minority are clearly disillusioned after continued disappointments in using the approach in their classes. What is often heard in education circles today is the word “khai-centered,” meaning “buffalo-centered,” in Thai, a slick metaphor for “learner-centered.”

“Buffalo,” the beast of burden, is used here as a metaphor for learners. A person thought to be very dumb is often dubbed “buffaloes” by many Thais. Likewise, inexperienced learners, particularly very young children in elementary grades or kindergarten school, are also being dubbed “buffaloes” because these learners are considered to be as dumb as the buffaloes by disillusioned teachers.

Disillusioned teachers maintain that “learner-centered” approach is nothing but “buffalo-centered” approach as inexperienced learners could be as ignorant as any buffalo and could be completely unfamiliar with the new materials they have to learn. As learner-centered approach requires heavy use of learner’s prior knowledge base, the approach could not succeed with learners who lack relevant knowledge base.

Furthermore, disillusioned teachers argue that transferring the importance, the power, and the control from teachers to learners, particularly to very young children, won’t work as the learners are too young to know what they want to learn and how to learn. Therefore, although learner-centered approach may produce good results with matured or more experienced learners or those learners with relevant prior

knowledge base, such approach might not be appropriate with very young children in elementary grades and it might backfire with such children. These criticisms against learner-centered approach have been quickly dismissed by other educators as sheer misunderstandings resulting from incompetent use by poorly trained teachers. Although criticisms against a teaching model with strong research backing such as learner-centeredness are unlikely to sway many educators, such criticisms do make some waves from time to time in the education circle. As the majority of teachers across the country have already switched over to learner-centeredness, and many more are doing so, learning reform is quickly reaching its goal of improving Thai education.

Empowering The Teachers: Getting Results From Learner-Centeredness

Empowerment is a widely accepted management concept. The concept says that people must be empowered in order to get better results from them. Employees must be empowered to get better results from them. Students must be empowered to get better learning outcome from them.

Teachers must be empowered to get better results from them. But, educational reformers in the government as well as many educators argue that teachers in this country have never really been empowered, and its time now to do something about it. As important players in current educational reform efforts, teachers must be empowered to get better results from them. It has become obvious to educational reformers as well as educators that without empowering the teachers, learner-centered approach could not succeed.

A lot of lip services have been going around for years about improving the gloomy and precarious life of Thai teachers and the teaching profession as a whole, but nothing significant has been done until the age of learning reform. Most Thai teachers from past to present have been plagued with low income, mounting debts, low morale, and high turnover. In addition, most teachers are poorly trained, poorly paid, poorly motivated, and being treated as just small cogs in the education system. Moreover, to remain in their jobs, teachers have to show complete submission to the wishes of their superiors, the mighty school administrators who sway a lot of power over the teachers.

To improve their gloomy and precarious life and their profession, teachers must be empowered. Teachers must have the power to improve their life and their job. The first wave of education reform implemented in 1999 contains several measures that would lead to teacher empowerment. These measures consists of what to have to be done to restructure the teaching profession.

Restructuring Teaching Profession to Empower the Teachers

Restructuring the teaching profession with the aim of empowering the teachers involves several measures. These include measures to improve teacher education and training, measures to enhance teacher's professional status, and measures to help teachers earn enough income for decent living.

Improvement of teacher education and training to enhance teacher knowledge, skills, and effectiveness is one way to empower teachers. Universities and colleges responsible

for providing teacher education are now extending teacher education curriculum to 5 years from original 4 years (4 years for course works and one year for developing teaching experience) to raise teacher's knowledge and skills. In addition, more budgets have been allocated for teacher development programs such as training seminars and further and continuing education.

Issuing, renewing, suspending, and revoking **teaching license** aimed at enhancing teacher's professional status and teacher quality assurance are also measures to empower teachers. To qualify for a teaching license, teachers who are entering the teaching profession after June 12, 2003 must have a teaching degree (B.Ed. in education or higher). Requirement for teaching degree is exempted for those who have been teaching full-time before that date, but a **bachelor degree** or higher (from an accredited institution) is required as proof of specialized training in the subjects they are teaching.

Teaching license is also an effective mechanism for getting rid of incompetent teachers from the teaching profession as well as preventing unqualified persons from entering the profession. Although renewable every five years, teachers could face their teaching license **suspended** or **revoked** any time if they are becoming real **deadwoods** and stop growing or developing professionally in their areas of specialization.

Moreover, the requirement for teaching license also serves as a mechanism for preventing teachers from teaching the subjects they have no specialized training or sufficient credentials. Native speakers of English who are now teaching English in Thailand, for instance,

unless they have a B.A. or B.Ed. in English, or TESOL, or TEFL as proof of specialized training in the language, will not be able to obtain a teaching license. To put it differently, merely being native speakers, but without any proof of specialized training in the language, would not qualify them for the teaching license. And without a teaching license, they can't teach. Using teaching license as a quality control mechanism is then an important educational reform strategy for empowering the teachers.

Restructuring teacher's salary, remuneration, fringe benefits, and other perks in order to help teachers earn enough income to make both ends meet and live a decent life are also measures for empowering teachers. The provisions in Section 55 of the National Education Act of 1999 allow for the use of various perks such as sizeable financial rewards such as research grants, outstanding teaching awards, and teacher-of-the-year awards, and other forms of subsidies as sources of supplementary incomes for teachers.

Is Learner-Centeredness Coming to Higher Education?

Many people do not think so. Although the National Education Act of 1999 (also known as the first "educational reform act" of Thailand) has made educational reform mandatory to all levels of education (including higher education), education reform efforts are still at the stage of restructuring basic education and reforming learning at primary and secondary school classrooms. Universities and other higher education institutions still remain very much unaffected by the educational reform. Reform efforts at high education are currently bogged down in the efforts to transform all state universities into autonomous

universities free from government control as part of restructuring higher education, but such efforts have met with little success due to stiff resistant from students.

At a time when primary and secondary schoolteachers nationwide are quickly switching over to learner-centered teaching approach, university classrooms across the land are still heavily dominated by the traditional lecture, a teacher-centered or content-centered approach the education reform trying to eliminate. Even in his speech on the “New Dimension of Thai University Education Reform” at Phisanuloke in August 2001, Prime Minister Taksin has strongly expressed his disappointment over the lecture and rote-learning methods of teaching university teachers are using.

As mentioned earlier, higher education reform is also mandatory by the National Education Act of 1999. Learner-centered approach, therefore, is not a choice; it is mandatory for all those who teach. For schoolteachers, the consequences of failing to teach by learner-centered approach can be fatal. Their teaching license many not get renewed; it may even get suspended or revoked. As teaching license is still not required for university teachers at the moment, the consequences of failing to adopt learner-centered approach may not be that fatal for them, unless it is also the mandatory teaching approach at the university. As of this writing no university has made learner-centered approach mandatory. However, ignoring the powerful trend in educational practices sweeping across this country today might not be in the best interest for university teachers as well as for their students.

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