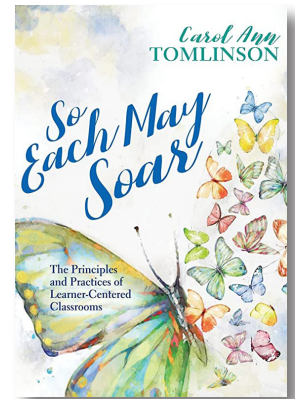


So Each May Soar

The Principles and Practices of Learner-Centered Classrooms

by **Carol Ann Tomlinson**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

So Each May Soar illuminates the next step in the education revolution— creating learner-centered classrooms that empower every student to gain a deeper and more lasting understanding of the content they study themselves, the people around them, and the world as a whole. This summary will help readers envision learner-centered classrooms that each child truly deserves, and discover that such classrooms are within reach at any institution.

There are four primary principles of learner-centered classrooms— establishing a positive learning environment, crafting curriculum with the right goals in mind, using formative assessment effectively, and crafting instruction that taps into student curiosity and interest, calls on students to build on what they know to solve meaningful problems, and fosters the type of deep thinking that has been proven to have lasting benefits for the learning.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN HOW TO:

- What it means for teachers to honor themselves, each learner, and the content they teach.
- How to shape a curriculum that ignites students' imaginations and drives discovery.
- How to guide classroom experiences that draw on and develop the strengths and interests of each learner.
- How to use curriculum, assessment, and instruction to support both equity and excellence.
- Concerns and demographics that reach all students.

Introduction

This book is about creating classrooms that are intentionally and persistently designed with students at the center of thinking, planning, implementing plans, reflecting, and revising. It explores:

- What it means to honor each learner.
- What it looks like and accomplishes when teachers create communities of learners that help young people to develop intellectual, affective, and social attributes that are likely contributors to their own success and to the success of a free society.
- What it entails to envision curriculum that captures the imagination of learners and contributes to their willingness—even eagerness—to pursue content that reflects the wisdom and practicality of being human.
- What it looks like when assessment becomes a process for revealing a learner’s growth to both the teacher and to that learner in ways that support each learner’s growth.
- What it means to create learning opportunities that develop the mind of each learner in accordance with that learner’s unique circumstances.

The book is also about:

- What it asks of teachers to lead classrooms that use our best knowledge of teaching and learning to shine the light of hope and promise on each young person in our care.
- Why equity of access to excellent learning opportunities is an imperative in our schools.
- How each of the key classroom elements—learning environment, curriculum, assessment, and instruction—appropriately shaped, contributes to both an ethic and practice of equity and excellence.

In sum, then, the book is about putting students at the center of classrooms where quality practice provides a trustworthy foundation for helping young people grow consistently toward a better understanding of themselves, others, and the world they are inheriting. It is about humanizing classrooms for every young learner who is more or less compelled to spend year after year in our company.

From Standardized to Learner-Centered

Nearly three decades ago, politicians raised the banner of a nation at risk, asserting that mediocre classrooms imperiled student learning. They proposed to address this problem by requiring annual student testing as a mechanism for improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Teachers have persisted on that course ever since, subscribing to the idea that the only way to measure a child’s knowledge is through prepackaged, high-stakes tests that, in the end, have undermined teachers’ autonomy; de-professionalized the teaching field; and left students of color, students from low-income communities, and students with significant learning challenges in the crosshairs of projected inferiority. (Love, 2020). These students persistently see themselves and their peers referenced as bottom-quartile scorers, regularly find themselves grouped with other low-scoring students, and experience curriculum that almost inevitably ensures that they will remain in the ranks of low test-scorers. Love poses a question that educators should not ignore: How does a student feel like he or she matters to a country and a system that measures knowledge against a gap it has created?

So where do we go from here? One possibility, of course, is that we continue on this path that requires us as teachers to leave their professional judgment and ingenuity in the parking lot when they enter the school building and sprint through increasing mounds of often-meaningless content handed to them in teacher-proof formats and pacing guides designed for coverage rather than for student learning. Notably, it’s a path that requires students to continue to measure their worth in test scores rather than in possibilities and dreams realized.

This book offers an alternative: refocusing our vision and energies to place students, rather than test scores, in the center of the work we do and working to ensure that the fundamental elements in student-centered classrooms reflect our best knowledge of quality educational practice. With those two goals to guide us, we would consistently grow our capacity to teach in ways most likely to humanize learning, to engage young people with the power of learning and their power as learners, and to prepare them for the world in which they live now and will live in the future. Toward that end, this book is a guide for creating learner-centered classrooms.

What Learner-Centeredness Is— And Is Not

Educators are obligated to ensure that each of the young people in their care is well-equipped for a meaningful, productive, and satisfying life, both during and after their “formal” education. This statement does not imply preference for certain post-graduation pursuits, occupations, or lifestyles. (People find meaning, make contributions to the welfare of others, and feel fulfilled through a great variety of paths.) Instead, it asserts that educators bear responsibility for preparing young people to pursue and maintain the positive life they choose. The statement does not suggest that teachers and schools bear full responsibility for such an outcome. It does, however, represent the view that schools and teachers have significant opportunity and responsibility to support young people in acquiring the knowledge, skills, and other resources that will allow them to build healthy lives, strong families, and become productive, contributing members of their community.

Learner-centered classrooms are—or should be—catalysts for creating places where young people and their teachers have space and opportunity to spread their wings. These classrooms are—or should be—designed to increase voice, autonomy, and agency for young learners and for the people who teach them. This is the core of the “why” of learner-centeredness.

If the “why” of learner-focused instruction is providing young people with the opportunities, resources, and support necessary to help them build a sound foundation for meaningful and productive lives, both present and future, then what is the “what” of learner-centeredness?

Fundamentally, learner-centeredness encompasses beliefs about and approaches to instruction that place students and their needs at the heart of teaching and learning. Teachers who practice learner-centeredness ask themselves, In what ways can I help each of my students most fully develop cognitively, affectively, and socially? or, from a slightly different perspective, How can I create an environment and learning opportunities through which my students and I can work together to help each of us, and all of us, build strong lives?

Learner-centeredness is rooted in the reality that meaningful learning about any aspect of life generally results from the learner’s active participation rather than passive receptivity. Thus, learner-centered classrooms are designed to engage students actively in their own growth and devel-

opment and to ensure that what students learn endures and serves them well throughout their lives.

The Learner-Centered Teacher

Placing the student at the core of classroom decisions and processes, which is the essence of learner-centered teaching, is challenging because it asks us to make a major shift in classroom roles and structures. We’re asked to turn away from an arrangement in which we are the power source toward one in which we intentionally and widely share power with our students. Making that transition is perplexing for many teachers because it’s so different from the idea of school most of us experienced in our own educational journeys, and because top-down mandates have provided teachers little opportunity to entertain student-centered philosophy and practice.

Teachers affect learners and learning. There’s no surprise in that statement. And sadly, there are as many teachers who have a significantly negative impact on students’ learning as there are who have a significantly positive impact (Hattie, 2012). As it turns out, the school a student attends is not nearly as important a factor in that student’s success as whose classroom the student is in. Wiliam (2011) notes that of all the factors that might contribute to student growth, “the only thing that really matters is the quality of the teacher”.

The goal here is to explore teachers’ personal and professional beliefs and practices that are foundational to effective student-centered planning and teaching.

Here’s where teachers can start:

- Establish a positive learning environment that leads to a strong team or community of learners and that operates with a balance of flexibility and stability necessary to foster students’ cognitive, affective, and social development.
- Craft curriculum that feels engaging and relevant to the full scope of learners in a classroom while building a solid understanding of the nature, intent, and fundamentals of the disciplines in which the curriculum is rooted.
- Use formative assessment, both formal and informal, to understand the cognitive, affective, and social growth of each learner in order to plan for and support that learner’s development in those three domains, and to help each learner understand and promote his or her own growth in those three areas as well.

- Craft instruction that focuses students on the critical knowledge, understanding, and skill that characterize a topic and discipline, tap into student curiosity and interest, call on students to use what they learn to address meaningful issues or problems, foster deep thinking, and help students develop a strong individual voice and a commitment to doing quality work.

However, modes of operation are nothing without an ethical compass.

A baseline principle of ethics is that people in positions of power must align their actions with the interests of stakeholders or anyone whose welfare is, to some degree, in the hands of the person who holds sway over them. Lorna Earl (2003), a noted Canadian educator, translates that principle directly into teaching when she says, “Teachers’ overriding moral purpose is to meet the needs of students, even when it conflicts with personal preferences”.

Key ethical concepts for teachers include:

- Accountability
- Beneficence
- Citizenship
- Empathy
- Equity
- Fairness
- Humanity
- Respect
- Responsibility

The next four sections expand on the nature of quality practice in each of the four key components of learner-centered classrooms. They also provide some important indicators of quality practice that reflect both the art and science of teaching and illustrate how the principles and practices spotlighted might look in a classroom and benefit student and teacher alike.

Honoring the Learner

All aspects of learner-centered instruction begin with a teacher whose attention is focused not on himself or herself, or even on the content, but on the student.

Due to external pressures or personal habit, the planning sequence in classrooms often begins with “What do

I have to cover tomorrow?” or “What work will I need to have ready for the students tomorrow?” Learner-centered thinking calls on teachers to begin with a different set of questions: What are the needs and nature of this class as a whole? and What are the needs and nature of the individuals who make up the class at this point in our work? The answers to those two questions drive everything that comes next, including how teachers plan the learning environment, curriculum, assessment, and instruction. This chapter focuses on what it means to honor the learner and all the implications of doing so: how it shapes the teacher’s mindset, how it positions the student to assume increasing ownership of his or her own learning, and how it contributes to a classroom environment that helps each learner recognize and work to develop his or her full potential.

Practices that honor the learner and help them grow:

- Develop affective and physical environments that feel safe, affirming, challenging and supportive to students with a range of learning needs.
- Develop classroom routines with the flexibility required to address students’ varied strengths and needs.
- Create curriculum that is likely to be relevant to students with varied interests, cultures, and experiences.
- Develop and learn from a variety of pre-assessments designed to locate students’ varied entry points into an upcoming unit of study.
- Use ongoing formative assessment information to consistently monitor student progress toward mastery of the knowledge, understanding, and skill designated as essential for a given sequence of learning.
- Use formative assessment information to help students better understand their progress toward targeted goals and to plan more effectively for their own continuing growth toward those goals.
- Provide actionable, student-specific feedback and work with students to create their own plans for next steps in learning.
- Use formative assessment information to create instructional plans designed to meet students where they are in a learning sequence and to guide them in moving forward.
- Mentor students in developing the skills and habits of mind that support success.

- Use information from observation and conversation to link instruction with student interests.
- Provide periodic feedback to students and caregivers.
- Create student work that positions all students as thinkers and problem-solvers, and provide a variety of scaffolds to support individual growth and success with the work.

Creating the Learning Environment

To create a learning environment is to erect an invisible architecture—one that calls on teachers to manifest their ideals, beliefs, and intentions in concert with their students. While the learning environment itself is not visible to the eye, you can see it daily in teachers' actions and reactions. It shapes every classroom element, for better or worse. It affirms or erodes learner self-confidence, builds or diminishes trust in the teacher, fosters or undercuts community, invites or damps intellectual risk-taking, and commends or disparages learning. It's an intangible entity that's powerful to a degree we can scarcely imagine. The truth is, the learning environment largely determines the degree to which a teacher can realize the vision of students developing their own unique voices, working as partners in success, acquiring and using durable knowledge, identifying as learners, participating in a meaningful community, and aspiring to grow continually.

There are at least four pathways through which teachers can lay the foundation for an environment that enlists student commitment to the hard work of learning, cultivates student voice, builds student agency, and contributes significantly to student academic, affective, and social growth. Those pathways are forging trust, building community, establishing partnerships, and modeling and teaching.

When students lack the traits or attitudes that would likely benefit their growth and development, it's important—for both our sake and theirs—to recall that it's a teacher's duty to silence the instinct to blame them. We must instead seek to understand each student's ineffective behavior as an indicator of need—for additional support, for better instruction, or for more opportunities of a kind that will provide both direction and hope.

Curriculum that Honors the Learner and Learning

Curriculum, this book proposes, is—or should be—a design plan to maximize the cognitive/intellectual, affective, and

social capacity of learners. It should help them encounter and engage with the most significant information, ideas, and skills that a discipline or content area affords. As a wise colleague reflected, curriculum is something students use, not something teachers present or cover. It's less the road map or mile markers on a journey to a test or to college and career readiness than the shoes students journey in. Curriculum is not a labyrinth to be navigated but a lantern that students hold aloft to find their way to a richer experience of life.

The two concepts at the heart of quality curriculum (and, therefore, at the heart of quality instructional and assessment practices) are engagement and understanding. They are central to quality curriculum because they are central to learning.

It's important, then, that teachers think carefully about ways in which what they teach and how they teach can lead each learner in the classroom to engagement and understanding. This is a foundational aspiration for student-centered classrooms—something to aim for every day.

Learner-Centered Assessment

Assessment in learner-centered classrooms seeks very different outcomes than the assessment that's common in many schools and classrooms. Like all other elements in learner-centered pedagogy, it's designed not to judge but to help maximize students' intellectual, affective, and social growth. In fact, assessment in these classrooms exists to ensure that student growth escalates consistently rather than stagnates.

It is past time to move away from the test-grade-report model of assessment and to focus instead on assessment that contributes to the process of learning and the progress of the individual student (Burke in O'Connor, 2009).

The linchpin for accomplishing the vision for more promising, equitable, and excellent approaches to teaching and learning is an understanding of assessment that shifts the focus from judging learning to developing the skills of learning.

Formative assessment is, or should be, more a process or a practice than a specific strategy or instrument. It's a kind of sleuthing that involves continual and purposeful hunting for clues about student progress, interpreting those clues, and acting on them in the near term to improve the match between instruction and learners' next steps in learning.

To argue for much broader and wiser use of assessment in schools is not to argue that all grades have to be elimi-

nated; rather, it points to the reality that schools, students, teachers, and parents have become so fixated on grades that actual learning has become secondary. The argument here is to recognize the potential damage of over-grading, which is both well documented in research and clearly visible in classrooms, and to balance the scales in favor of feedback that stems from authentically implemented formative classroom assessment.

Learner-Centered Instruction

Instruction is where it all comes together—or, perhaps more accurately, where determined teachers try their very best to make it all come together. Instruction is the arena in which philosophy, beliefs about learners and learning, ideas about the role of the teacher, plans for building community, curriculum design, and assessment meld into a live-action drama centered on the uniquely human capacity to learn from the past and present in order to contribute to a better future. Wiliam captures the stakes when he writes, “The greatest impact on learning is the daily lived experiences of students in classrooms, and that is determined much more by how teachers teach than by what they teach.”

There are principles and practices of quality instruction that are remarkably stable across contexts from preschool through university levels. Learner-focused teachers tend to ask themselves similar guiding questions as they plan, implement, reflect on, and continue planning instruction. There are also some common classroom practices that reveal misconceptions about teaching and learning that learner-focused teachers must reject based on considerable research over many years and the goals of student-centeredness. The rejection of certain practices and the embrace of others are informed by four philosophical assertions, which should be familiar by this point in the book:

1. The student is at the center of instruction and instructional decision making.
2. The goal of instruction is to make sure that each student has the opportunity and support necessary to maximize their intellectual, social, and affective capacity.
3. Effective learner-centered instruction is necessarily also knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered.
4. Effective learner-centered instruction rests with

teachers who are: committed to the development of each learner in their care, invested in contributing to equity and excellence in learning opportunities, eager to learn and grow personally and professionally, and willing agents of change.

Conclusion

Quality learner-centered practices provide a reliable compass to guide the work of teachers. They offer a broad array of approaches to and models for teaching, from direct instruction to inquiry, from academic teams to product-based learning, from workshop-based to community-based learning. The success of any approach to teaching rests on the teacher’s will and skill in applying our best knowledge of what constitutes quality practice within that approach. Combined with principles like equity, excellence, high expectations, teaching up, flexibility, and differentiation, these practices will set the foundation for classrooms—and schools—that help learners in the ways they need most, preparing them for fruitful and fulfilled lives in education and beyond.



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