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## Academic papers

# A teacher's perspective on student centred learning: Towards the development of best practice in an undergraduate tourism course

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism and hospitality educators have been encouraged to implement various student-oriented teaching practices beyond conventional teacher-directed approaches. This exploratory study focuses on how teachers integrate this concept into their classroom practices and students' learning experience. Reflective action research was used as a conceptual framework, focusing on the four main indicators such as content structure, individual engagement with learning, peer interactions, and student reflection on the learning process. The results of this study indicated significant benefits of the student-centred approach. However, several problems and difficulties were identified, and this paper gives a number of strategies and recommendations for improvement.

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## 1. Introduction

Much of the research in higher education has recognised the importance of student-centred learning (Ramsden, 2003). This approach gives priority to a more student-centred approach rather than a strong emphasis on teacher control as a content-developer (Adams, 2002; Anderson, Johnson, & Saha, 2002; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; Robertson, 2001), presenting a pedagogical challenge which calls for a change in current university's teaching policies. Such a transition in educational paradigm towards a student-centered approach has been strongly influenced by the constructivist perspective which highlights deeper learning, life-long learning and problem-solving skills (Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). Student-centred learning is a form of study in which students have the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge as instructed by teachers' direction (Maher, 2004). That is, the student-centred perspective focuses on 'what learners do' and 'why they think they are doing it', rather than 'what the teacher does' (Biggs, 1999).

As the benefits of student-centred learning have been extensively emphasised in the education literature, an increasing number of tourism and hospitality educators are actively incorporating this approach into their curriculum (Watson, McGuire, & Barron, 2006). Although it is often noted that in university education students should develop responsibility for their own learning, this can be a challenging task for both the teachers and students. Grow (1991) argues that a mismatch between student-oriented learning and teaching strategies could reduce student learning outcomes and satisfaction. It is suggested that alternative educational strategies and different methods are necessary to understand what factors influence

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successful integration of teaching strategies into the student-oriented approach (Lea et al., 2003; Scheyvens, Griffin, Jocoy, Liu, & Bradford, 2008). Yet, there have been few studies that fully explore different ways of designing and implementing successful student-centred teaching approaches from a teacher's perspective (Cobanoglu & Berezina, 2011; Huang, 2005; Robinson, 2008). This paper responds to this application, especially by focusing on how teachers design and implement their teaching practices to maximise student-centred learning outcomes. Special attention is given to understanding, from a teacher's perspective, the complex and contextual factors that influence potential dilemmas and problems when implementing this in real classroom situation.

## 2. Literature review

There has been growing attention paid to a student-centred teaching approach in higher education in a range of subject areas (Abel & Campbell, 2009). The essence of student-centered learning is students' self-directed and active involvement in the learning process, rather than the passive learning style of the traditional teacher-centered model (Biggs, 1999; Maher, 2004). Traditionally in higher education environment, teaching has been strongly influenced by the instrumentalist tradition which emphasises teacher-control and the direct transmission of domain knowledge from teachers to students. In this context, the main role of students is to passively receive, assimilate and revise information (Plasschaert et al., 2007; Torenbeek, Jansen, & Hofman, 2009). While the teacher-centred approach still appears dominant in some education settings where teachers deliver lectures to a large number of students (Conti, 2004; Liu, Qiao, & Liu, 2006), an increased insight into progressive education policies has led to a movement towards a student-centred approach.

The concept of student-centred learning, influenced by the constructivists, is rooted in Dewey's Humanist views which reflect experiential learning, individualised learning, self-direction, and self-actualisation (Boone, Gartin, Wright, Lawrence, & Odell, 2002). Consistent with experiential learning principles identified by previous researchers (Kolb, 1984; Fowler, 2008), student-centred learning expects students to take an active part in planning learning objectives, organising their activity to meet those activities, and conducting and assessing their own learning experiences. As part of experiential learning, this active learning process can help students construct their own insights, critically review the relationships between theories and real-life examples and apply the knowledge to other situations (Biggs, 1999; Marton & Säljö, 1997; ; Rust, Price, & O'Donovan, 2003). Student-centred learning is one of its outstanding examples that place the student in a more active and self-directed role.

Recognising the important value of student-centred learning, there is evidence that higher education has increasingly accepted this as one of the innovative teaching approaches for improving the quality of student experience and delivering deeper learning outcomes (Abel & Campbell, 2009; Maher, 2004; Watson et al., 2006). The ultimate goals of student-centred learning are more closely related to the facilitation of higher-order thinking skills (i.e. comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of knowledge) rather than knowledge and recall of facts, as proposed by Bloom (1956). This learner-centred approach can influence students' deeper learning whilst teacher-oriented approach may result in surface learning outcomes. In other words, students in a learner-centred environment can have cognitively deeper and richer learning experiences due to their active participation and interactions in the learning process (Newble & Cannon, 1995; Torenbeek et al., 2009). The teacher-focused approach, by contrast, tends to encourage a surface approach to learning among students where retention and reproduction of information is temporary, generalisation of knowledge is poor, and the learning of study skills (e.g. critical thinking and problem-solving skills) is minimal (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999; Prince, 2004). Considerable evidence supports the effectiveness of student-centred over teacher-directed learning (e.g. Kayes & Kayes, 2003; Lea et al., 2003). Lea et al. (2003), for example, found that students in student-centred learning environments had better study skills and deeper understanding of the subject matter. They also indicated that students felt more respected and gained self-confidence, and evaluated the curriculum as more interesting and pleasant. Similarly, in the tourism and hospitality education context, tourism educators are now starting to recognise the advantages in being able to improve the quality of student learning experiences in order to achieve graduate outcomes such as lifelong learning, professional skills, and problem-solving skills which are required as essential attributes for a tourism and hospitality professional (Maher, 2004; Watson et al., 2006).

More importantly, in an effort to promote and practise the vision of student-oriented teaching, recent research suggests that alternative assessment strategies such as authentic assessment can be developed and applied to a student-centred teaching environment to evaluate both students' active learning process and their learning outcome (Abel & Campbell, 2009; Pedersen & Williams, 2004). Authentic assessment is different from traditional assessment such as exams or quizzes, which students are often expected to complete as directed by teachers' structured guidelines and criteria. Authentic assessment refers to a form of assessment in which students are asked to perform and demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge, skills and attitudes to actual and real-life situations derived from professional practice (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). Authentic assessment focuses on examining what students can do and how they engage in assessment outcomes such as creating original artefacts, presentations or posters (Abel & Campbell, 2009). In addition, this type of assessment involves students evaluating their own work, helping to move their attention away from grades and towards learning goals. Pedersen and Williams (2004) argue that applying authentic assessment to a student centred-teaching approach is necessary as it can examine not only how educators assess students, but also how they will translate their assessment practices to justify effective outcomes of student-centred approaches (Pedersen & Williams, 2004).

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