Student-centred learning in higher education and adult education

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Abstract
Student-centred learning is a central concept in the field of adult education and has also become an important topic in higher education discourse. In this paper the concepts and practices of student-centred learning in both adult education and higher education are explored with the aim of uncovering similarities and differences in the way student-centred learning functions in each. Clear differences are identified in the origins of the concepts of student-centred learning in adult education and higher education, but a framework for relating practices of student-centred learning is proposed, and contemporary conditions which may justify the revision of some of the arguments traditionally used to distinguish the two sectors are considered.

Introduction
The concept of student-centred learning is prominent in a range of educational discourses, and represents a venerable tradition which, according to Fay (1988, p.8), ‘is a concentration of the ideas of humanist philosophy and psychology which recognises the integrity and freedom of the individual and attempts to convert the teaching/learning process accordingly – running from Socratic method through Dewey to Rogers.’ Brandes and Ginnis (1986) note that the term ‘student-centred learning’ itself was invented by the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers, and indicate that it is synonymous with such other terms as ‘active learning’ and ‘participatory learning’. In this paper, the focus will be on the concepts and practice of student-centred learning in the learning and teaching discourses of higher education and adult education. This dual focus has the advantage of highlighting and relating practices that revolve around a shared interest in ‘the adult learner’. Although there is little explicit emphasis in the higher education learning and teaching literature on the fact that learners in higher education are overwhelmingly adult learners, the growing popularity of student-centred learning in higher education discourse hints that the conditions may be appearing for fruitful dialogue between adult education and higher education on their shared subject.

This paper will first sketch some of the historical background of student-centred learning, and then explain how the concept has always been a guiding principle in adult education. This will be followed by survey of the emergence and interpretation of student-centred learning in the higher education learning and teaching literature. The set of practices thus described will then viewed in relation to each other to produce a student-centred learning framework that may serve to clarify some of the issues relating to student-centred learning that can be found in both adult education and higher education learning and teaching theory. Such a framework may also contribute to a dialogue between higher education and adult education. Finally, an argument will be proposed for reconsidering the traditional differences between the enterprises of adult and higher education.

Student-centred learning
As mentioned above, student-centred learning has its roots in humanist thought. Humanism is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy as ‘a set of presuppositions that assigns to human beings a special position in the scheme of things’ (1995, p. 340). The entry goes on to contrast humanism with two other broad viewpoints, one being that divine or transcendent principles can be
used to explain the world and human being within it, and another that resorts to the natural order for explanations and sees the human being as one species among many animals. The entry also declares that ‘Humanists attribute crucial importance to education, conceiving of it as an all-round development of personality and individual talents, marrying science to poetry and culture to democracy. (1995, p. 341) It stands to reason that a worldview which situates humanity at the centre of the universe will place a special value upon the cultivation of the human spirit.

The emphasis on individual development in humanism is reflected in the ‘progressive’ educational philosophy of John Dewey (1859-1952). According to Elias and Merriam (2005, p. 54), progressive education is chiefly concerned with developing a learner-centred approach to education. Dewey’s argument rests on a critique of what he called ‘traditional’ education which consists in handing down the wisdom of the past in the form of organised bodies of knowledge represented in textbooks by teachers who take positions of authority and are responsible for transmitting the disciplines to learners who are forced in this setting to adopt a receptive, passive attitude to learning (1938, p. 18). Dewey expresses the contrast between traditional and progressive education in the following way:

To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world. (1938, pp. 18-19)

Elias and Merriam point out that making the development of the potential of the learner the main task of education entailed beginning the educational process by attending to the needs and interests of the learners and ‘using the lives of the learners as starting points.’ While progressive education became a major influence on educational practice, many of its assumptions – including student-centeredness – came under scrutiny and attack. Dewey himself went on to criticise progressive education for its ‘lack of discipline, learner-centeredness, focus on trivial problems, little attention to subject matter, anti-intellectualism, and a lack of a clear definition of the teacher’s role.’ (Elias and Merriam, 2005, p. 56)

Carl Rogers (1902-1987) revived interest in student-centred learning, although his ideas stem from a humanist psychological theory known as ‘client-centred therapy’. This approach is captured in the ‘therapists hypothesis’ that ‘the individual has a sufficient capacity to deal constructively with all those aspects of his life which can potentially come into conscious awareness.’ (1951, p. 24) By adopting this hypothesis, the therapist is committed to a non-directive role who works with the client to derive the therapy from the client’s own resources. In Rogers’ view, the client-centred approach appeared to apply to areas outside therapy including education. He asked ‘If the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding, and respect is the most effective basis for facilitating the learning which is called therapy, then might it not be the basis for the learning which is called education?’ (1951, p. 384) He goes on to propose hypotheses of a ‘student-centred teaching’ (1951, p. 388) such as ‘We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his learning’ (1951, p. 389) and ‘A person learns significantly only those things which he perceives as being involved in the maintenance of, or enhancement of, the structure of the self’. (1951, p. 389) These suggestions for student-centred teaching echo Dewey’s call for the needs and interests of the student to be taken as a starting point for education and the role of the teacher to shift from authority to facilitator.
Brandes and Ginnis (1986) furnish an elaboration of Rogers’ suggestions that is widely-quoted in the literature on student-centred learning (e.g., Fay, 1988, Lea, Stephenson and Troy, 2003). In Brandes and Ginnis’s (1986, p. 3) version of student-centred learning, ‘students are encouraged to participate fully in, and take responsibility for, their own learning; each individual is valued and trusted.’ They articulate their approach in the following principles (1986, pp. 12-15):

- The learner has full responsibility for their own learning
- Subject matter must have relevance and meaning for the learner
- Involvement and participation are necessary for learning
- Relationship between learners is important
- The teacher should be a facilitator and resource person

They contrast the style of teaching in which these principles are implemented with a traditional or didactic style which places the student in a passive role and positions the teacher as distributor of knowledge who has exclusive control over curriculum planning.

Dewey and Rogers provide philosophical and psychological justifications for student-centred learning, and Brandes and Ginnis help to show how they can be applied in the classroom by teachers. However, the student-centred learning framed by Dewey and Rogers and articulated by Brandes and Ginnis is primarily directed to the schooling sector. In the next two sections the extension of student-centred learning to adult education and higher education is explored. It will be seen that in the context of adult education, the influence of Dewey on the theory and practice of student-centred learning is central, although the situation is more complex in the case of higher education.

**Adult education and student centred learning**

Eduard Lindeman was a disciple of Dewey and one of the founders of the field of adult education. Lindeman’s *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926), regarded as a seminal text in the development of adult education (Elias and Merriam, 2005), sets out a humanist philosophy of education that places the learner firmly at the centre of the educational enterprise. Although this doctrine closely follows Dewey’s, the key difference is that where Dewey was primarily concerned to work out a theory of experiential education for children in a school setting, Lindeman defines a new realm of learning in which to apply Dewey’s ideas.

Lindeman’s philosophy of adult education supplements a positive humanist vision of the potential of adult humans with a critique of existing educational provision and attitudes in relation to learning, a strategy that parallels Dewey’s distinction between traditional and progressive approaches to education. He objects particularly to the belief that education is something that can be regarded as at some point ‘complete’, and from which point real life begins. This view, that education is ‘a necessary annoyance’, was for Lindeman a crippling limitation upon human potential. However, he felt that a new paradigm was emerging. He claimed that,

> A fresh hope is astir. From many quarters comes the call to a new kind of education with its initial assumption affirming that education is life – not a mere preparation for an unknown kind of future living. Consequently all static concepts of education which relegate the learning process to the period of youth are abandoned. The whole of life is learning, therefore education can have no endings. This new venture is called adult education – not because it is confined to adults but because adulthood, maturity, defines its limits. (1926, p. 5)
A key element of Lindeman’s prescription for the new field of adult education was that the content of this learning should not be based on traditional disciplines. He explains that adult learning is best approached through ‘situations’ rather than subjects. He adds that

Our academic system has grown in reverse order: subjects and teachers constitute the starting point, students are secondary. In conventional education the student is required to adjust himself to an established curriculum; in adult education the curriculum is built around the student’s needs and interests. Subject matter is brought into the situation, is put to work, when needed. Texts and teachers play a new and secondary role in this type of education. They must give way to the primary importance of the learner. (1926, p. 6)

But what is this new form of education to look like? Lindeman does not systematically develop a form for the new kind of education, but some hints are provided. He says,

Authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogical formulae – all these have no place in adult education. Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigorous; who dig down into the reservoirs of their experience before resorting to texts and secondary facts; who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education, the modern quest for life’s meaning. (1926, p. 7)

These extracts demonstrate that from its inception, adult education proclaimed the centrality of the learner. It is also clear that this radical vision of student-centred learning places the learner at the centre in both a pedagogical sense and a curriculum sense. In other words, how as well as what the learner learns has been recast in Lindeman’s philosophy.

Inspired by Lindeman, the work of Malcolm Knowles offers a systematic theory of adult education that expands on both the how and the what of adult learning. He calls this theory ‘andragogy’ (in explicit contrast to ‘pedagogy’) and defines it as ‘the art and science of helping adults learn’ (1970, p. 38). Knowles bases his theory of andragogy on an analysis of the adult learner that keeps in view the contrast between children and adults as learners. Four major characteristics of adult learners emerge from this analysis: self-concept as an independent actor, role of experience in learning, influence of ‘developmental tasks’ on readiness to learn, and learning oriented to real-life problems. From these characteristics, Knowles draws a set of learning and teaching implications that outline an adult education practice. The characteristics and learning and teaching implications are summarised in Table 1.

Knowles develops Lindeman’s critique of discipline-based learning by furnishing a rationale for rejecting a curriculum based on existing knowledge. Following A. N. Whitehead, Knowles argues that contemporary learners differ in a key respect from learners in earlier times in that in previous centuries, what a person learned in their youth was valid throughout their life, whereas a contemporary learner can expect to see the knowledge they acquired earlier in their life outdated within their lifetime. Knowles concludes that ‘it is no longer functional to define education as a process of transmitting what is known; it must now be defined as a lifelong process of discovering what is not known.’ (1970, p. 38)

For both Lindeman and Knowles, adult learning program development must be guided by the needs and interests of learners rather than being based on established disciplines awaiting transmission. Knowles offers both theory and techniques for determining adult interests and needs. On the theoretical side, he draws upon models of human development to construct an inventory of needs to help orient adult education program development. Three cardinal needs of adults are identified,
the first being the prevention of obsolescence, which refers back to the rationale for rejecting established curricula as the basis for adult education programming. To answer this need, adult education should help adults discover that learning is a lifelong process and acquire the skills of self-directed learning. (1970, p. 23) The second need that adults have is ‘to achieve complete self-identity through the development of their full potentialities.’ (1970, p. 23) Knowles draws on Maslow’s well-known ‘hierarchy of human needs’ which culminate in a ‘need for self-actualisation’ to supply a basis for this need. The third need is for maturation, and this complicated need is articulated in 15 dimensions of maturity, for example, from dependence to autonomy, from selfishness to altruism, and from a need for certainty to tolerance of ambiguity. (1970, pp. 25-29) Knowles believes that addressing these fundamental needs constitutes the ‘mission’ of the adult educator, and that adult education programs must be oriented to the fulfilment of these needs.

Table 1. Characteristics of adult learners and implications for learning and teaching (from Knowles 1970)

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<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Learning-teaching implications</th>
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<tr>
<td>Self-concept</td>
<td>Adults view themselves as independent agents (as opposed to children who are dependent)</td>
<td>• Learning climate: comfortable, respectful, informal, teacher presents as equal  &lt;br&gt; • Self-diagnosis of learning needs  &lt;br&gt; • Learner involvement in the planning of learning  &lt;br&gt; • Self-directed learning  &lt;br&gt; • Self-evaluation</td>
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<td>Experience</td>
<td>Adults bring a fund of experience to learning, and see themselves in terms of their experience (as opposed to children who have less experience and see experience as happening to them)</td>
<td>• Emphasis on experiential techniques that tap into experience, e.g.  &lt;br&gt; o Group discussion  &lt;br&gt; o Case method  &lt;br&gt; o Role play  &lt;br&gt; o Action projects  &lt;br&gt; • Emphasis on practical application  &lt;br&gt; • ‘Unfreezing’ and learning to learn from experience</td>
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<td>Readiness to learn</td>
<td>Adults have ‘developmental tasks’ that determine their readiness to learn, e.g.,  &lt;br&gt; • Starting an occupation (early adulthood)  &lt;br&gt; • Assisting teen-age children to become responsible and happy adults (middle age)  &lt;br&gt; • Adjusting to decreasing physical strength and health (later maturity)</td>
<td>• Learning should be timed to coincide with appropriate developmental tasks  &lt;br&gt; • Grouping of learners with similar developmental tasks</td>
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<td>Orientation to learning</td>
<td>Adults learn in response to immediate pressures and are problem-centred (as opposed to children who learn for postponed application in a subject-centred frame of mind)</td>
<td>• Learning should address the ‘existential concerns’ of the learner  &lt;br&gt; • Curriculum should be based on ‘problem areas’ rather than subjects  &lt;br&gt; • Starting point of learning should be immediate concerns and goals of learners</td>
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In Knowles’s theory, adult interests are defined as the expressed preference among possible activities perceived as potentially satisfying educational needs. If a need is expressed behaviourally as a “want” or a “desire”, then an interest can be said to be expressed as a “liking” or a “preference”. (1970, p. 86-87)

He emphasises that adult interests are highly personal and therefore vary widely among individuals and vary within the same individual over time. Nevertheless, current interests or ‘problem areas’ are a potent source of motivation for adult learning, and Knowles (1970) accordingly promotes techniques such as questionnaires to determine learner interests as a basis for selecting or designing curriculum content.

Andragogy employs an analysis of the adult learner to generate learning and teaching techniques and curriculum guidelines, the how and the what of adult education. Typical adult learning scenarios that conform to Knowles’ (1970) principles range from the individual pursuit of a subject of interest or ‘hobby’ (often referred to as ‘informal learning’) to semi-formal groups of learners pursuing shared activities such as reading or discussion groups. Through Knowles’ work, student-centred learning is firmly established at the centre of the adult education enterprise. The position of student-centred learning in this context is justified by a humanist image of the learner that understands education as essentially an activity which serves the cultivation of human potential. In the background of this philosophy is a critique, expounded in one form or another by all of the theorists examined so far, of traditional approaches to learning that understand education as essentially the transmission of established disciplines.

The focus of this section has been on Lindeman (1926) and Knowles (1970). However, their attitude to traditional approaches to teaching and a focus on individual needs and interests is shared by the great majority of adult education thinkers, including Freire (1970), Houle (1972), Knox (1974), Jarvis (1983), Brookfield (1986), and Mezirow (1991).

Given this apparent antipathy between student-centred learning and education regarded as the transmission of disciplines, the spectacle of the growth of interest in student-centred learning in higher education presents an apparent conundrum, for the higher education enterprise surely consists in the preservation, growth and transmission of disciplines. In the next section the trajectory of student-centred learning within higher education discourse will be traced with the aim of clarifying its nature and role in higher education.

Higher education and student centred learning

Biggs (1999) describes transformations in higher education which have stimulated interest student-centred learning in the sector. He writes that since the late 1980s the university system worldwide has undergone ‘extraordinary’ change. Control has become more centralised, with decision-making influenced by economic and managerial considerations. He emphasises the allure of international undergraduate teaching as a source of funding perceived to be more lucrative than research or higher degree work. At the level of university teaching, he highlights a number of differences that flow from changes in the structure, function and financing of the system. First, a greater proportion of school leavers are now attending university. They include those who Biggs (1999, p. 1) labels ‘the brightest and most committed students’ – learners who tended to make up the bulk of the traditional student body – but also many more ‘of rather different academic bent’ (ibid.). As a result, today’s university teachers encounter a greater range of ability within classes than ever before. Second, because more students are paying more for their university education, they expect value for their money. Third, diversity in ability is compounded by diversity in terms of age and experience, socioeconomic background and cultural background of students. Fourth, class sizes have increased
and finally, more courses have a vocational focus. Together, these changes have created a significant set of challenges for contemporary university teachers. (Biggs, 1999, pp. 1-2)

According to Biggs (1999, p. 2), ‘When university classes contained highly selected students, the traditional methods of teaching, lecture followed by a tutorial, gave the appearance of working well enough.’ These students, as he illustrates with reference to the fiction of ‘Susan’ (‘academically committed’, ‘bright and interested in her studies’, ‘has clear academic or career plans’, etc.), ‘virtually teach themselves, with little help from us’ (1999, p. 3) In this kind of educational situation it is not surprising to find that traditional methods could flourish – or appear to flourish. It is also the academic culture to which Dewey (1938), Rogers (1951), Brandes and Ginnis (1984), Lindeman (1926) and Knowles (1970) object in their prescriptions for education. Biggs (1999), too, is critical of the traditional approaches that have dominated university teaching, and argues that the answer to the problem created by the failure of traditional methods to cope with the challenges of change in higher education ‘is to take a fresh look at what we mean by teaching.’ (1999, p. 2)

John Biggs is among a group of researchers and theorists that includes Dianna Laurillard, Noel Entwistle, Dai Hounsell, Graham Gibbs and Paul Ramsden, who were critical of traditional approaches to teaching in higher education and sought to create a new paradigm of university learning and teaching that overcame the limitations of the traditional practice. However, their new paradigm, which opened the way for the emergence of student-centred learning in higher education, owes little if anything to humanism, progressivism or andragogy. Rather, their advances are based on ‘phenomenographic’ research into the nature of student learning such as that reported by Marton and Säljö (1976).

Phenomenography, according to Marton (1988, p. 144), ‘investigates the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or think about various phenomena.’ He goes on to note that phenomenography is ‘more interested in the content of thinking than is traditional psychology’, which tends to focus on the act of perception or conceptualisation. Psychologists, Marton (1998, p. 145) explains, ‘seek overarching laws of thought and perception that can be applied no matter what the situation or subject matter. Within phenomenography, thinking is described in terms of what is perceived and thought about; the research is never separated from the object of perception or the content of thought.’ Marton (1998) illustrates phenomenographic research with reference to a study that examined the impact that university courses in mechanics had on students’ understanding of basic physical phenomena. This particular research revealed two distinct ways in which the students conceived the specified phenomena. Marton (1998, p. 143) says of these conceptions that one is Newtonian and represents the ‘correct’ way of thinking about the phenomena, while the other was apparently common during an earlier period in the history of science. Although Marton (1998, p. 143) claims that the rightness or wrongness of conceptions exhibited in the research ‘is of little interest’ to the enterprise of phenomenography, the fact that the methodology allows these types of conclusions to be drawn is significant for anyone interested in the problem of teaching correct, or at least acceptable, ways of thinking. The intrinsic relatedness to testable content that defines phenomenographic research is of decisive importance for the group who were searching for a new paradigm of university learning and teaching, for they were not at liberty to scrap the established bodies of knowledge that are the content of the disciplines as were the other critics of traditional forms of teaching who pioneered adult education.

Marton (1998) implies that phenomenography does not give rise to overarching laws that can apply to any subject. Yet writers such as Laurillard (1979) and Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) saw in phenomenographical research results that come close to the status of overarching laws in higher education learning and teaching theory: the concepts of surface and deep approaches to learning derived from Marton and Säljö (1976). In this seminal paper, Marton and Säljö (1976, p. 7) argue
that differences in learning outcomes suggest differences in learning processes, and go on to distinguish 'deep-level processing' and 'surface-level processing'. They explain that

In the case of **surface-level processing**, the student directs his attention towards learning the text itself (**the sign**), i.e., he has a 'reproductive' conception of learning which means that he is more or less forced to keep to a rote-learning strategy. In the case of **deep-level processing**, on the other hand, the student is directed towards the intentional content of the learning material (**what is signified**), i.e., he is directed towards comprehending what the author wants to say about, for instance, a certain scientific problem or principle. (1976, pp. 7-8)

Two features of this argument recommend its application to the project of formulating a new paradigm of university learning and teaching. First, because Marton and Säljö’s (1976) research makes generalisations about learner approaches to texts, the results are highly relevant to learning in higher education, a process in which the text is a near ubiquitous tool. Second, the characterisation of surface-level processing points to the sort of results traditional approaches to teaching were thought to produce. For Biggs (1999), at any rate, the conclusion is clear: the new kind of university teaching practice needs to be focussed on the level of processing taking place in the student, and teaching must strive to encourage the student to adopt a deep approach rather than a surface approach to learning.

Biggs (1999) explicitly relates traditional teaching practices to the adoption of a surface approach by learners. He presents three levels of thinking about teaching, the first of which is apparently fixated on 'what students are' and conceives of effective teaching as displaying information and the learner's role as passively absorb this information. Differences in outcomes come down to intrinsic qualities of students. At the other end of the scale is a way of thinking about teaching that is characterised by a focus on 'what the student does'. Biggs (1999, p. 24) states that this 'level 3' thinking represents a student-centred theory of teaching. Level 3 teaching is concerned about whether students are engaged in ‘appropriate’ learning activities given the content of the curriculum. Biggs (1999, p. 30) indicates that the criteria for determining the appropriateness of the learning activities are whether they ‘maximise the chances that students will use a deep approach’ and ‘minimise the chances that they will use a surface approach.’

Biggs’ (1999) interpretation of Marton and Säljö’s (1976) concepts and the way he presses them into the service of a new practice of university teaching is not unique, and finds echoes and parallels in the work of Laurillard (1979) and Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), Gibbs (1991), Prosser and Trigwell (1999), Cannon and Newble (2000) and Ramsden (2003) and others. All of these researchers have helped to establish a new paradigm of higher education teaching practice that embraces student-centred learning. Cannon and Newble’s (2000, p. 16-17) definition of student-centred learning reflects this new paradigm:

> Student-centred learning is a broad term that is used to describe ways of thinking about teaching and learning that emphasize student responsibility and activity in learning rather than content or what the teachers are doing. Essentially, student-centred learning has student responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to a strong emphasis on teacher-control and coverage of academic content found in much conventional, didactic teaching.

They add that according to research they have considered,

> teachers who believe their job is to cover the subject systematically by transmitting information to students are more likely to encourage surface learning approaches among
their students. On the other hand, there are teachers who consider that what students do and the quality of learning outcomes that result from student activity is more important than subject coverage. Such teachers, who describe their teaching as student-focused, are less likely to encourage surface learning approaches among their students.

A number of studies demonstrate the growth of interest in student-centred learning in higher education discourse and the translation of the new paradigm into specific practices (e.g., Prendergast 1994, Livingstone and Lynch 2000, Rust 2002, Edwards and Thatcher 2004, Kinchin, De-Leij and Hay 2005, Montgomery 2008). Prendergast’s (1994) research illustrates the application of a number of student-centred learning techniques. This study into the effectiveness of a ‘student-centred course’ approach used in a large Consumer Behaviour class specified four ways of implementing student-centred learning principles. First, students were involved, through voting, in making a number of content and planning decisions such as relative weighting of formative and summative assessment, type of final exam (e.g., open book versus closed book), amount of group work compared to individual work, learning outcomes, etc. Second, learning activities all involved high levels of student activity, through group discussions and reporting, practical exercises and personal reflection which supplemented interactive lectures. Third, high levels of student interaction were promoted through the design of learning activities. Finally, students were exposed to ‘a well structured knowledge base’ (1994, p. 52) throughout the course, by which Prendergast means that the overall picture was kept before the students and content was ‘integrated rather than delivered as small separate pieces’. Evaluation of the course indicated that the student-centred learning approach was a clear success. Prendergast (1994, p. 60) concludes that

Overall it appears that this course achieved an unusual treble: higher levels of student learning, higher student workload, and yet, higher levels of student enjoyment. This would tend to demonstrate the merits of a student centred approach to learning and tends to dispel the myth that student-centred approaches can only be successful in the smaller class setting.

Prendergast’s (1994) research affirms the efficacy of student-centred learning in higher education, but the study does raise some questions. One question is the pragmatic one of increased student workload. According to one of the students in the study, ‘This course had twice the workload of any other course... I could not have coped if I had to do as much work in each course’, while another complained of a ‘Very high workload (spent the majority of time on this subject)’. Such responses suggest that significant institution-wide adjustments would need to be made if all courses implemented student-centred learning in the way described by Prendergast (1994). Another question has to do with employing student voting to make planning and content decisions. How are minority views to be respected in this scheme? If the purpose of voting was to create a sense of ownership, as Prendergast indicates, what sense of ownership would those whose wishes were voted down retain? However, no obvious solution to this dilemma – which bedevils the practice of democracy in general – is available. A final question concerns opening up the process of determining course outcomes to student involvement. Happily for Prendergast (1994) the students in his research articulated the expectation that at the end of the course they would be ‘able to understand and apply consumer behaviour theories and concepts.’ But what would have been the response if a confused or irrelevant outcome was devised by the students? This aspect of the research is not described in detail, so we cannot be certain about how much guidance is reflected in the students’ formulation (which seems strikingly like the sort of outcome an academic would construct).

Other studies that throw light on particular student-centred learning practices include Rust (2002), who reflects on student-centred assessment practices, including self-assessment and peer assessment. He suggests that such practices enhance student learning, although he stresses the
need to carefully prepare students for their role in these kinds of assessment. Montgomery (2008) discusses the arrangement of teaching and learning spaces, and explains the potential for the management of learning spaces to lead to student passivity. Conversely, student involvement in arranging learning spaces can enhance learning. Montgomery’s (2008) work may have limited relevance to the theory of student-centred learning, but it does highlight a dimension of student activity that contributes to a broader picture of student-centred learning.

The emergence of student-centred learning in higher education discourse has also generated controversy. According to Farrington (1991, p. 16), ‘there is more rhetoric than reality involved in claims about student-centred learning methods in higher education.’ His research, based on hundreds of observations of teachers, found only one example of tutor giving students full responsibility for their learning. At the other end of the scale he reports that perhaps a dozen sessions he observed did not involve students at all, placing them in a passive position. The majority of observations revealed what Farrington calls ‘liberal teaching styles’, in which ‘some attempt was made to give some responsibility or initiative to students to control the learning process, and where students’ responses were warmly received and incorporated into the overall lesson, but where it was clear that the teacher was making most of the decisions about pace, style and general conduct of the lesson.’ (1992, p. 18) Farrington (1991) notes as well that institutions and government agencies engage in a rhetoric of student-centred learning apparently intent upon promoting a progressive image. Lea, Stephenson and Troy (2003) report on the views of students who are themselves sceptical about student-centred learning. Although these students value student-centred learning approaches, they expressed concern about the level of support provided by institutions for student-centred learning and suspect that student-centred learning may be part of a rhetoric employed by institutions for purposes other than learning.

**Relating practices of student-centred learning in adult education and higher education**

The preceding sections outlined the philosophical roots of the concept of student-centred learning and described how the concept was developed in the context of adult education. The emergence of student-centred learning was also traced in higher education, and it was suggested that the concept in this sector springs from a different source to the one at work in adult education. However, there are a number of overlaps between the practices of student-centred learning in the two sectors, and many of the justifications are similar. In this section a framework for conceptualising and relating practices of student-centred learning across higher education and adult education will be considered. This framework will contribute to the argument of the final section that will attempt to synthesise the concepts of student-centred learning from the two sectors.

The framework outlined here is based on a typology proposed in Fay’s (1988) critical discussion of the differences between open learning and student-centred learning. He was concerned to highlight the dangers of embracing open learning without considering the significant costs involved in offering properly supported and resourced programs. Fay (1988) was also at pains to underscore the differences between open learning and the concept of student-centred learning in a policy context that tended to conflate the two. To make these differences as clear as possible, Fay (1988) drew on the work of the sociologist of education, Basil Bernstein, to create a typology that conceptually contrasted open learning and student-centred learning.

Fay (1988, pp. 8-10) employs two of Bernstein’s concepts to structure his framework. ‘Classification’ is one of these, and refers to ‘the relative demarcations of subject matter in terms of disciplines, content and boundary’. ‘Framing’ is the second, and refers to ‘the defining agents of learning and to the conditions of learning such as pacing, selection, location.’ Fay (1988) goes on to explain that in Bernstein’s theory, both classification and framing can be either ‘weak’ or ‘strong’. For example,
subject integration initiatives in schools that blur the lines between discipline areas would be an example of ‘weak’ classification structure. Another example of the way Bernstein’s ideas could play out would be a ‘strong’ framing effect produced by a highly directive teaching style.

Fay (1988, pp. 8-9) juxtaposes the concepts of framing (F) and classification (C), and the strong (+) and weak (-) modalities possible for each to produce a fourfold scheme (with part of Fay’s elaborations) as follows:

+\(C\) +\(F\) the traditional academic model where both content and conditions are tightly controlled by institution and lecturer.

+\(C\) –\(F\) [the open learning model]. Here, content is still tightly controlled... The difference is that conditions are relaxed to a greater or lesser extent in terms of selection, pacing, location, etc.

–\(C\) –\(F\) the truly student centred model in which both contents and conditions are determined by learner.

–\(C\) +\(F\) a contradictory model which has been associated with the ‘new vocationalism’ or ‘tertiary modern’ sector; with the army of the young unemployed socialised and institutionalised through schemes such as the Youth Training Scheme.

Fay’s (1988) argument hinges on the conceptual gap between strong classification/weak framing and weak classification/weak framing categories, and the wedge he hoped it would introduce into policy thinking about open learning and student-centred learning. But Fay’s (1988) framework has uses beyond this policy goal, and may be utilised to conceptualise student-centred learning practices across adult education and higher education sectors.

The concept of classification and its two forms may be applied to a major difference between the content of learning in adult education and higher education. It was shown above that both Lindeman (1926) and Knowles (1970) rejected established disciplines as the basis for adult learning curriculum, and that Knowles (1970) proposed deriving educational content from the needs and interests of adult learners. This displacement of disciplinary knowledge indicates a sector characterised by weak classification. At the same time, the active role accorded to the learner in adult education, the degree of responsibility the learner has for their own learning and the facilitative, non-directive role expected of the teacher amount to a weak framing structure. Fay’s (1988) attribution of ‘the truly student centred model’ to the weak classification/weak framing category supports this characterisation of adult education student-centred learning practice.

It is suggested here that classification remains strong in the higher education sector, especially in contrast with adult education. However, bearing in mind the division argued by writers such as Biggs (1999) and Ramsden (2003) between traditional and student-centred approaches to teaching in higher education, it would follow that both strong and weak framing can be found within the sector. Also, given Farrington’s (1991) research findings, it would seem that a continuum rather than a distinction lies between the extremes of strong and weak framing in higher education. A possible continuum of teaching practices in higher education may be proposed on this basis:
Table 2. A continuum of teaching practices in higher education (employing Fay’s (1988) adaption of Bernstein’s concept of framing).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong Framing</th>
<th>Weak Framing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Traditional teacher-centred learning (lectures and fixed seating arrangements)</td>
<td>• Traditional teacher-centred learning (lectures and fixed seating arrangements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students involvement in teaching space arrangement (Montgomery 2008)</td>
<td>• Students involvement in teaching space arrangement (Montgomery 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interactive lectures (Prendergast 1994)</td>
<td>• Interactive lectures (Prendergast 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student input into assessment and learning activity planning (Prendergast 1994)</td>
<td>• Student input into assessment and learning activity planning (Prendergast 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Group discussions and student-led projects (Prendergast 1994) and self- and peer-assessment (Rust 2002)</td>
<td>• Group discussions and student-led projects (Prendergast 1994) and self- and peer-assessment (Rust 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student involvement in the formulation of course outcomes (Prendergast 1994)</td>
<td>• Student involvement in the formulation of course outcomes (Prendergast 1994)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A complete framework for relating practices in both higher education and adult education may thus be proposed:

Table 3. A framework for relating teaching and learning practices in higher education and adult education (based on Fay’s (1988) framework).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Education</th>
<th>Adult Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strong Classification</strong></td>
<td><strong>Weak Classification</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Framing</td>
<td>Weak Framing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional teacher-centred learning (lectures and fixed seating arrangements)</td>
<td>strongest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students involvement in teaching space arrangement</td>
<td>strongest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive lectures</td>
<td>strongest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student input into assessment and learning activity planning</td>
<td>strongest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group discussions and student-led projects and self- and peer-assessment</td>
<td>strongest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student involvement in the formulation of course outcomes</td>
<td>strongest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak Framing</td>
<td>Weak Framing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and discussion groups</td>
<td>weakest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The point of proposing this framework is that it serves to place both adult education and higher education within the overarching context of educational knowledge as understood by Bernstein (1971) which minimises differences arising from historical contingencies allowing student-centred learning practices across both sectors to be viewed in relation to each other.
Conclusion: relating concepts of student-centred learning in higher education and adult education

There is another way to relate concepts of student-centred learning in higher education and adult education that revolves around reconceptualising the relationship between the two sectors. Returning to the starting points of Lindeman’s (1926) critique of traditional approaches to education and rationale for adult education as a distinct educational field, it can be supposed that if he was confronted with university teaching practices that included group work, voting on content and conditions of learning and assessment, and even learner involvement in the formulation of course outcomes, as well as significant numbers of older learners attending university as part of a culture of ‘life-long learning’, in addition to a move away from the traditional disciplines to more vocationally oriented subjects, Lindeman might have been led to make room for higher education within the broader humanist project of adult education. The contemporary reality of higher education undermines many of the arguments Lindeman (1926) presented for separating adult education from other educational sectors. In contemporary society, university is no longer the last stage of the preparation of youth for the professions and academia, but an institution to which adults may return again and again throughout their life as an option for addressing their ‘needs and interests’.

The characteristics of modern higher education as described by Biggs (1999) – catering for a greater proportion of the population, diversity of the student body, vocationalisation – which created challenges to traditional university teaching are at the same time factors that confirm the contribution of higher education to the ideal of lifelong learning envisaged by Lindeman (1926). This broader conception of higher education is also part of the larger discourse of education reflected in keys documents such as the *Review of Higher Education* (‘The Bradley Review’ 2008) commissioned by the Australian government ‘on the future direction of the higher education sector, its fitness for purpose in meeting the needs of the Australian community and economy and the options for reform’ (2008, p. X). For example, this report argues for an increase in the proportion of the population that holds a higher education qualification, and the convergence of the higher education and vocational education sectors. If these changes indeed mark ‘the way forward’ for higher education in Australia at least, then there will be fewer and fewer reasons in future to oppose the enterprises of adult education and higher education. In such a future, student-centred learning would function as the common centre for both sectors.
References


Brookfield, SD 1986, Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.


