


An Essential Question for Developing Student-Centered Classrooms

By Tom Bonnell

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to hear [Alan November](#), a thinker  [Back to Story](#) and consultant on the use of technology in schools. He asked a simple question that changed the way I think about teaching and crystallized my growing sense of the importance of understanding student-centered learning. November's question was this: "What are you doing in your classroom now that you could turn over to your students to do themselves?"

The question dazzled me in its simplicity. It struck me as being much like a koan in Zen Buddhism—a paradoxical question whose solution comes not from the rational, analytical mind but from a deeper wisdom that lies within the individual. November's question, like a razor-sharp sword, cut through questions of developmental levels and differences between subjects, leaving those matters to be addressed by each individual teacher. It forces educators to think deeply about the heart of their practice.

"What are you doing in your classroom now, that you could turn over to your students to do themselves?"

In a 21st-century world where students will likely have to reinvent themselves and their careers multiple times, the question has acquired depth that it didn't have even 20 years ago. Preparing students to be responsible for their own learning, to ultimately become "the teacher" themselves, must become one of our highest priorities in schools. Just as a parent's ultimate success arrives on that day when the child can flourish independently of the parent, so our success as teachers should be measured in large part by our graduating students who have mastered the art of guiding their own learning, knowing what the important questions are, and how to find the answers.

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Even in schools where there is already a high level of student engagement, where there is active rather than passive learning, it is sobering to realize how many classes are still fundamentally teacher-centered. Maybe this is because it is so hard to teach students how to take our place, to assume our roles; indeed, a truly **student-centered classroom** is messier and frequently doesn't look as good. And, of course, there is something of an actor in all good teachers, some part of us that loves being the center of the stage or, at least, keeping our foot on it.

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As a principal, I am still learning to detect the signs of a truly student-centered room. One simple sign I have come to look for is when I walk into a classroom and can't spot the teacher for a few moments, because he or she is sitting among the students, watching them lead the discussion or simply working on the class assignment with them. In such a classroom, I often have to ask, "Where is Ms.

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___?" Only to hear her call out, "Here I am!"

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A truly student-centered classroom is also one where the students' voices are heard significantly more than the teacher's and where their interactions are at the center of the learning process.

The best teachers are, of course, eclectic and choose the teaching approach that best suits the lesson and will provide the greatest access to the students in the class, whether this is direct instruction or even, on occasion, a short lecture. Indeed, another skill that students will need as they progress through their education and into the world is flexibility, the ability to learn in different ways.

Nevertheless, many classrooms could benefit by making students more responsible for things that we teachers are accustomed to doing for them. But if we succeed, we need not be anxious that we will no longer be needed, for there is surely no end of essential questions to be asked that will lead to better teaching.

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