

# IMPLEMENTING STUDENT CENTRED LEARNING IN A TRADITIONAL TERTIARY ENVIRONMENT

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## BACKGROUND

A growing trend towards providing more student centred learning experiences in tertiary education is evident in Australia. Student centred learning (SCL) requires active rather than passive learning with an emphasis on building deep learning and understanding. This places increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student fostering an increased sense of autonomy in the learner. Interdependence between teacher and learner and mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship are central to SCL as is a reflexive approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both teacher and learner. Many institutions are moving towards blended and flipped classroom models of instruction encouraging such active student engagement.

However, there are considerable ingrained constraints to implementing student-centred learning in universities. The traditional teaching method in tertiary education is teacher-centred with a focus on the lecturer as expert controlling dissemination of transmission-style learning where coverage of content constitutes learning. The spatial environment of many university teaching spaces reflects authority and control of the lecturer/teacher for example; lecture theatres, classrooms with rows of desks facing the front of the room. Institutional and Faculty arrangements reinforce this teacher-centred approach including class timetabling, assessment policies (largely summative) and staff workload models based on the lecture/tutorial/exam structure. The modern institutional reality is 'massification' and corporatisation of universities leading to high enrolment numbers, large and diverse student cohorts with reduced government funding. Economic drivers for profit and increased funding lead to reduced student contact hours and higher student/staff ratios.

We face the reality that formal study is only one of multiple student commitments. Students expect an instructivist teaching model and perceive lecturer as expert and only person qualified to disseminate knowledge and assess academic performance. Students are reluctant to take on a more active learning role. We face a shift to students as 'clients' of universities and the educational services they pay to access and hence their expectation of a 'return' on their investment.

## AIMS

Our aim was to explore if student centred learning could be effectively implemented within a teacher centred learning environment as defined by these acknowledged institutional constraints?

On the basis of our diverse teaching backgrounds we argue that the tutorial is the ideal place to implement student centred learning in a university environment. We explore the notion and definition of tutorials and consider the teaching and learning commonalities across many university disciplines. We provide a list of activities and strategies which require a similar amount of preparation (and essentially the same type of preparation) as classical tutorials. These strategies and activities also fit within current university settings and their identified constraints. As such, tutorials offer a way to implement student-centred learning within institutional structures that are not otherwise orientated towards this learning approach.

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