

Rethinking Student-Centered Learning in College: A Review of B. Macfarlane's “Freedom to Learn”⁺

Hsiou-huai Wang^{*}

In recent college teaching reforms, “student-centered learning” has been the magic word to transform the traditionally passive and apathetic classroom into a lively and active hall of learning. Proponents of this approach advise teachers to adopt strategies to “engage” students to learn, including: active attendance and participation in discussion and presentation, etc. In such “student-centered” classrooms, students no longer sit still to learn, but are actively “engaged” in learning through a variety of activities that demonstrate their on-task performances. Furthermore, to evaluate if a student is “engaged” in learning, certain performative expectations have been gradually developed into behavioral standards that students are expected to conform with in some campuses.

Amid such rising trend of performative culture in the name of student engagement, this book “Freedom to Learn” provides a timely critique and in-depth reflection on this prevailing but much overlooked phenomenon. The author, B. Macfarlane, raises fundamental questions about the meaning of “student-centered learning” and calls for a renewed respect for students’ right to learn and freedom to make choice. He suggests that the so-called student engagement strategies have led to a student performativity culture such as attending classes, showing an “enthusiasm” for learning or demonstrating emotions such as “empathy” through a self-reflective exercise and so on. As teachers tend to evaluate student learning based on these observable performative behaviors, students are very likely to conform to these standards by showing those surface

Manuscript received: 2016.12.24

⁺ Macfarlane, B. (2016). *Freedom to Learn: The threat to student academic freedom and why it needs to be reclaimed*. Abingdon, GB: Routledge.

^{*} Hsiou-huai Wang: Professor, Center for Teacher Education, National Taiwan University, Taiwan; E-mail: wanghs109@gmail.com

behaviors without really being “engaged” in learning. To the author, the idea of student engagement has ironically become the very killer of students’ genuine motive for learning and their capacities to become autonomous learners. For example, in such classrooms that encourage or even press students to act “actively” by raising questions and expressing ideas openly, if a student is quiet, inclined to contemplate, or accustomed to think rather than talk, he or she might be assessed negatively or even marginalized in such classrooms. For these students, such classrooms are not “student-centered” at all and are detrimental to their right to learn.

The author bases his argument primarily on the perspective of humanistic psychology that stressed the importance of holistic development of an autonomous whole person. Based on this perspective, he made several critiques on the current performativity culture. First of all, while the current performative student-centered approach underscores collectively observable student behaviors, humanistic psychologists advocate for a “real” student-centered learning that respects each student’s individuality, gives each student the right to choose what is fittest for him/herself and provides ways to actualize him/herself in the process of learning. Moreover, in the current performative campus culture, students are often treated as customers and teaching & learning as an act of transaction, the teacher-student relationship has increasingly become alienating and disaffecting. However, humanistic psychologists promote a safe and empathetic classroom atmosphere so that teachers and students are able to develop a genuine relationship of trust and empathy, which is vital for them to engage in meaningful dialogues and for students to develop as autonomous learners. Further, humanistic psychologists believe that students should be free to choose what and how to learn and become responsible for their own learning. Therefore, schools should not force students to learn what they don’t feel like to learn and in ways that are not fit for them.

While the author based his argument on the humanistic proposition for freedom to learn, as a Chinese reader, I appreciate the author’s argument from a cultural perspective. Previous research showed that, compared with their Western counterparts, Chinese learners tend to shy away from raising questions or expressing their ideas openly in class. They are more likely to sit quietly and listen to the teacher attentively and work hard to finish homework assignments and tests. Such way of learning, characterized by concentration, earnestness,

perseverance, hardship, can be called as the "virtue-oriented" approach to learning. It is deep-rooted in the Confucian belief about learning as a way to improve oneself inwardly and as an act of perfecting one's character. Therefore, traditionally, a teacher is deemed as a model of the knowledgeable scholar and moral character. A student is expected to sit attentively to listen what is conveyed by the teacher and try hard to emulate and absorb it into his inner being through memorization, understanding and even contemplation. That's why a traditional Chinese classroom is in general relatively quiet and attentive.

Unfortunately, such mode of learning is very likely to be interpreted as "passive" and "apathetic" in the so-called "engaging" performative classroom as the author of this book has pointed out. The teacher may be criticized for the solo lecturing and students may be ridiculed as passive "sit-ducks." As recent reforms in Taiwan are promoting a more pro-active culture in school and in the classroom. Innovative instructional strategies such as inquiry-based learning, flipped classroom, cooperative learning and so on, tend to expect students to express ideas and engage in dialogue with the teacher and peers openly in class. While such strategies are strong in motivating student to learn, it should be cautious against a performativity culture as indicated by the author of this book that may become the very obstacle for authentic and autonomous student learning.

In summary, the author has critiqued problems with the student performativity culture in today's college campuses and called for a timely reflection on the in-depth meaning of "student-centered learning," so as to respect students as autonomous learners who are free to choose what and how to learn. With such proposition, this book has made a unique contribution to the field of college teaching in specific and higher education in general. It is important to recognize that human learning occurs in multitudes of modes and shades. Underneath the seemingly "inactive" appearances, real learning may indeed be happening and even thriving. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be sensitive to the needs of individual students with diverse learning styles and tendencies in class. It is also crucial for schools/colleges to recognize such rich landscapes of learning developed in diverse societal and cultural contexts and foster a more embracing "student-centered" culture of teaching and learning.

