Abstract

Student centeredness and the related terms - student centered classroom and student centered learning are very commonly used nowadays. The aim of this paper is to examine how university professors understand the concept of student centeredness, if and how they apply it in their everyday teaching situations and to what extent it is really present in today’s university classrooms. The assumption is that apart from language teachers at South East European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia, university professors of content subjects, such as economy, law, and other professionally related courses, do not fully implement student centered learning. They do not seem to be familiar with the scientific background of the concept and the ways to achieve it. The methodology includes class observations of hundred and sixty eight (168) university professors from the five Faculties and the Language Centre at SEEU, conducted during two academic years and interviews with twelve (12) professor. The teaching observation process is one of the instruments for quality assurance (QA) operated at SEEU. Recommendations based on findings are expected to be useful for all teaching staff at university level, as well as for policy makers in the country and the region because of the similarities of their educational programs.
Keywords: student centeredness; university; methodology; teaching; observations;

1. Introduction

In the 21 century, one would believe that the traditional approach to education, with the teachers and their input being in the centre of class activities instead of learners’ needs and interests, should have been overcome. Interactivity nowadays is not only the key precondition for successful learning in a language classroom where it is necessary for students to communicate with the teachers and among each other, but it is also very relevant in all other classrooms in order to shift the focus from the teacher to students. Moreover, it seems that nowadays student centeredness is so much present in classrooms and taken for granted that it becomes almost irrelevant to explore it any more. As Taylor (2013) argues, “it is now an approach that is so commonplace that few have questioned its underpinning theory or meaning, its continuing relevance or its impact on practice” (p.40). However, as noticed further by this author, there is much more in the core of this concept than is usually perceived and done in practice that it can present difficulties in student achievement.

In tertiary education, student centeredness has even greater relevance for the success of learning because of the maturity of the learners. Creating student-centered learning environment in which higher education institutions and their staff can promote pedagogical innovations and thus enhance the quality of learning and teaching is the main mission of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Student centeredness was not directly tackled in the Bologna process at the beginning. It was fully taken into consideration in 2009 during the Leuven Ministerial conference, ten years after the historical Bologna Declaration (1999). The representatives of the countries participating at the conference reasserted the importance of the teaching mission of higher education institutions.

Student-centered learning requires empowering individual learners, new approaches to teaching and learning, effective support and guidance structures and a curriculum focused more clearly on the learner in all three cycles.

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1 European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was created resulting from the political will of 48 European countries.
Curricular reform will thus be an ongoing process leading to high quality, flexible and more individually tailored education paths. (Communique, 2009)

Traditionally, university classrooms were extremely instructor centered which according to Weimer, (2002) worked against students becoming successful and responsible learners. Reviewing the theories about learning, Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (1999) point out that what students do in class is more important for their learning than what teachers do. This is compatible with the constructivist view of learning as an active process in which learners build new ideas or concepts based on their current and past knowledge. (Hein, 1991). “In higher education context, teachers need to create opportunities for practice and exploration, and for interaction with others, and learning from and with peers and experts” (Fry, Ketteridge, Marshall, 1999, p.22). In other words, university professors have to shift the focus from pure transmission of knowledge through lecturing, to engaging students in meaningful tasks. The active student involvement in the learning process with all the elements that it entails is referred to in this paper as student centeredness.

The aim of the paper is to examine how university professors understand the concept of student centeredness, if and how they apply it in their everyday teaching situations and to what extent it is really present in classrooms nowadays. We hypothesize that apart from the language teachers at South East European University (SEEU) in North Macedonia, university professors of content subjects, such as economy, law, and other professionally related courses, do not fully implement student centered learning. We further hypothesize that they are not well informed about the theoretical background behind the concept and thus the classroom application is incomplete.

The next section revises the relevant literature about the definition and scope of student centeredness or student centered learning in general and its meaning and application in higher education, in particular.

2. Definition of student centeredness

O’Neill and McMahon (2005) state that the term student centered learning is overused and it may mean different things to different people. In practice it is also described by a range of terms and this has led to confusion in its implementation. Terms such as active learning, experiential
learning and self-directed learning are linked to the concept of student centered learning.

As already mentioned in the introduction, the theoretical standing of student-centered learning appears to relate mainly to the constructivist view of learning in the importance it places on activity, discovery and independent learning (Carlie and Jordan, 2005). Constructivism refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves or as Hein (1991) points out, “each learner individually and socially constructs meaning as he or she learns” (para II). According to this theory of learning, students take an active role in the learning process rather than being passive recipients of information from the teacher.

Learner-centered approaches mean that persons are able to learn what is relevant for them in ways that are appropriate. Waste in human and educational resources is reduced as it suggested learners no longer have to learn what they already know or can do, nor what they are uninterested in. (O Neil and McMahon, 2005 p. 37).

Some researchers define student centered learning as an approach in which students can make their own choices. (Jacobs and Hayirsever, 2016). They argue that this is active learning because the student is more active than the teacher and there is a shift in the power relation between them. The following principles have been pointed out as relevant in a student centered classroom (p. 3):

- Student is completely self-responsible for his/her learning
- Attention and attendance are necessary for learning
- The relationship between students is more equal and supports development
- Teacher is a facilitator and a supervisor
- Student experiences different areas at the same time (emotional and cognitive areas are parallel)
- Student realizes herself/himself different as a result of the learning experience

Describing student-centered instruction in higher education (Oinam, 2017) contends that students and instructors share the focus and instead of listening to the teacher exclusively, students and teachers have to interact equally. This approach requires group work and collaboration and communication among students. It includes active learning, in which students “solve problems, answer questions, formulate questions of their
own, discuss, explain, debate, or brainstorm during class; cooperative learning, and inductive teaching and learning” (p. 29). Similarly, Lynch (2010) claims that the learner centered approach directly involves learners in the learning process by raising social activities like collaboration, meaningful communication, choice and cooperation. Asoodeh and Zarepooyr (2012) add more activities to the list of tasks in a student centered classroom: open ended assignments, critical-thinking exercises, simulation, and problem-solving.

The literature indicates that the shift from teaching to learning and the teacher focused transmission of information formats, such as lecturing, have begun to be increasingly criticized and this has paved the way for a growth of student centered learning. However, despite the widespread use of the term, Lea et al. (2003, in O’Neill and McMahon, 2005) maintain that one of the issues with student-centered learning is the fact that “many institutions or educators claim to be putting student-centered learning into practice, but in reality they are not” (p.30).

O’Neil and McMahon (2005) propose some teaching methods and offer ideas for implementation of student centered learning. For lecture format, they suggest organization of discussions in small and larger groups, class presentations, students doing mind maps in class, quizzes, role plays and poster presentations. For outside the lecture, some ways to achieve centered learning would be through assigning independent projects, peer mentoring of other students, writing journals and diaries, computer assisted learning (CALL), portfolio development etc.

Larasati (2018) argues that there are two specific approaches to students-centered learning. The first one was derived from the research on child development and involves experimentation and play as valuable forms of learning and interaction. Critical thinking, combination of ideas, imagination and reflection will contribute to understanding and learning. The other approach involves experimentation and testing of ideas through which children would have direct feedback on their ideas. “Here, the process of playing and doing experiment done by the students becomes the powerful way to develop individual thinking and creativity” (Larasati, 2018, p. 155).

The literature shows that student centered learning is a process in which students take an active role inside and outside the classroom; that teachers are only facilitators in the process and not transmitters of knowledge. Teachers should create conditions for students to become active learners
and there are specific methods that have been proven to facilitate understanding, learning and creation of knowledge.

3. Methodology

In order to examine how university professors understand the concept of student centeredness and if and how they apply it in their everyday teaching situations, two instruments are used: class observations of 168 university professors conducted in the period of 2 academic years and interviews with 12 professors. The aim is to test the following two hypotheses:

- Apart from language teachers at SEEU, the professors of content subjects do not fully implement student centered learning.
- The content area professors are not familiar with the theoretical background of the concept of student centered learning and the ways to implement it.

The teaching observation process was first introduced at SEEU in 2007 as part of a project supported by the US government and since then it has contributed a lot towards the improvement of teaching and learning. It has led to an increased awareness among staff about the different teaching and assessment methods and it has created opportunities for discussions and training in the areas that need improvement. It still provides evidence for promotional purposes and annual staff performance evaluation. Observations are carried out by the Deans and Pro-Deans, the members of the Faculty Quality Teams and other professors approved by the Councils at each Faculty. All observers attend a short training before doing the observations so that they know what to focus on during observations and

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2 There are five Faculties at SEEU: Business and Economics, Law, Contemporary Social Sciences, Contemporary Computer Sciences, and Languages, Cultures and Communication. They have academic titles and are referred to as professors. The University Language Centre is an autonomous academic unit and it provides language courses for students of all Faculties. The LC staff consists of Lectors and High Lectors and here they are called teachers.

3 According to the 2018 Law on Higher Education in North Macedonia, it is a requirement for every Faculty to have a body consisting of all stakeholders: professors, students and external members. At SEEU, these bodies are called Quality Teams. They take part in decision making processes regarding curricula creation and other relevant matters.
how to provide feedback. The Quality Assurance Office coordinates the process and generates data centrally.

Prior to the observation, the professors prepare a lesson plan for the observed class and after the observation they receive a report that contains statements with grades from 1 to 5 about five categories: preparation, content and resources, teaching and management, learning, and assessment. Two other rubrics have to be filled in by the observers: a written summary of the good practices and areas for improvement in the observed class. There is a feedback session after the observation during which the observers and the observed professor discuss the points written in the report and after it is signed by all of them, it is submitted to the Quality Office. For the purpose of this study and analysis of how professors apply student centered learning in their classes, the categories of teaching and management, and learning at general level and for every Faculty and LC separately have been considered, as well as the summary of all identified points for improvement.

Interviews with 12 professors have also been conducted in order to reveal their attitudes with regard to the meaning and application of student centered learning. 2 professors from every Faculty have been selected, one senior and one junior. None of the senior professors had received any methodological training prior to joining SEEU. The only assistance related to their teaching practices has been provided from the annual professional development sessions organized at SEEU. Few of the junior professors had been educated abroad and seemed more familiar with contemporary teaching methods. On the other hand, the 2 language teachers, besides their regular studies that included courses in teaching methodology, frequently attended different kinds of professional development sessions.

4. Discussion of findings

4.1. Class observations

Tables 1 and 2 below illustrate the average results from class observations at University level in the academic years 2017/18 and 2018/2019. The average values are calculated from individual grades per Faculties, by transferring the statements into numbers with an overall

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4 Twice a year, in January and August, the University management and the Quality Office organize professional development sessions with internal presenters on areas identified as critical for University development and quality assurance.
grade from 1 to 5 for every category and every professor. For instance, in the teaching and management category, the statements demonstrating student centered learning as indicated in the literature, are as follows: There was a connection between the new material and previous knowledge; there were relevant examples and/or models or explanations to clarify the new concepts; the teacher used appropriate teaching methods (presentation, group, pair work, discussion, debates, etc.); the teacher managed to achieve high level of interactivity and student participation.

In the learning category, the statements that refer to student centered learning are: All students participated in the learning process, and Students were inspired to think critically (analyze, discuss, make conclusions and share ideas with their peers and the teacher). The observers should mark one answer: Strongly agree (5), agree (4), no opinion (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). Then, the grades are added up and divided by the number of questions in every category to get the average grade.

Table 1. Average values from class observations academic 2017/2018 at SEEU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Content and resources</th>
<th>Teaching and Management</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CST</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCC</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>4.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSS</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEEU</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Average values from class observations, academic 2018/2019 at SEEU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Content and resources</th>
<th>Teaching and Management</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CST</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCC</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSS</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEEU</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it can be seen from the average values of all Faculties and University average values, in the two academic years, the category of learning has the lowest grade, although all values are pretty high. The only exception is the Language Center with higher average values in the category of learning. The LC teaching staff shows high average values in the category of teaching and management, as well. The Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication is another unit with high average values in the categories of teaching and learning because they also have staff with methodological training.

The identified areas for improvement, stated in the reports by the observers, are used as another indicator for estimating if and how professors apply student centered learning in their classes. The table below (Table 3) contains summarized comments for improvement related to teaching and learning in the two academic years:
Table 3. Summary of identified areas for improvement during class observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas for improvement academic 2017/2018</th>
<th>Areas for improvement academic 2018/2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More active student participation</td>
<td>Motivate students to participate actively during the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find ways to make students come more prepared for class</td>
<td>Engage the latecomers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send feedback to students on given tasks</td>
<td>Use the slides to raise more questions and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide practical examples for application of theoretical knowledge presented</td>
<td>Give more time to students to reflect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop students’ critical thinking Using cases studies</td>
<td>Give feedback to students for their assignments and grade them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better organization of group work (not all students participate equally)</td>
<td>Give a rubric to students for evaluating peer presentations which will make them follow the presentations actively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create more challenging tasks for students</td>
<td>Ask individual and not only choral questions in order to follow students’ individual progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating opportunities to activate all students</td>
<td>Consider ways for motivating passive students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide additional materials</td>
<td>Use quizzes to make students come prepared for class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since observers had been trained to look for good teaching practices, they were able to identify in which areas professors needed improvement in order to implement student centered learning that would activate all students and contribute to more successful learning. Their evaluations came directly from class observations and were therefore very objective and relevant.

4.2. Teachers’ interviews

The interviews with 2 content area professors from every Faculty and 2 language teachers were conducted around two topics: How they understood the concept of student centeredness and how they implemented it in class. “Activating students”, was the most frequent response that was received. Some professors were more informed about what the concept included and how it could be achieved. “Student centeredness is when students work in
groups” (Professor 1). There was a big difference in the answers between the language teachers and other professors. The first were quite familiar with the notion, what it included, why it should be implemented and through which teaching methods. “Hands on activities”, was the phrase used by one language teacher:

One can learn the language only if he/she uses it. If I don’t create conditions for speaking English in class and that can be achieved only if students are active participants, there is no other place where students can practice the language.

The content area professors were also familiar with the necessity to engage students and make them active in class, but they would not give up the lecture format. The common matter to realize was the fact that some senior professors thought that there should be a clear distinction between lectures and practice and during lectures, the professor had to have the central role and ‘teach’. Interactivity could be achieved only during practice, when students would be required to work on practical cases. It did not seem quite clear to them how student involvement could be achieved as asking questions to students was mentioned quite often. The junior professors, especially those that had been educated abroad, were more aware of the meaning of the concept and how it could be implemented in class and they called upon their international experience and things they had been asked to do while studying. Methods like case studies, debates, discussions and presentations were mentioned.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusion, based on analysis of class observation reports and interviews with professors is that they are all quite familiar with the concept of student centeredness. In general, they understand its meaning, they try to implement it in class and they are aware that it is a must nowadays. However, a deeper analysis shows that when it comes to its implementation in everyday teaching situations, students’ active participation is not so easy to achieve and it requires more efforts from teachers’ side. The lower value in the learning category from the observation reports indicates that what teachers do is still more important than what students learn. Despite being aware of the need to put students in the focus, professors seem to lack knowledge and skills how to achieve that shift of power. The hypothesis that apart from language teachers,
professors of content subjects do not fully implement student centered learning has been confirmed. Content area professors, unlike language teachers, had not received any methodological training prior to starting their university teaching careers and thus they are not familiar with the theory behind the concept and why it has become so popular and widespread. The second hypothesis of the study has also been confirmed.

The more informed and trained professors, those who conducted the observations, offered excellent ways to implement student centered learning. They coincide with all good teaching practices found in the literature and are listed in Table 3. Teachers should constantly reflect and check their own practices in order to be able to address students’ needs.

It is recommended to all higher education institutions to organize some basic training or a mini course for their teaching staff before they start teaching. Such training will introduce them to the theories of learning, some other aspects of educational psychology and teaching methodology. Professors of content subjects can be experts in their fields, but that expertise does not make them good teachers. They cannot be asked to provide something for which they have not been trained themselves. This is the responsibility of the institution. Regular training in teaching methodology through workshops, peer feedback, class observations and other kinds of professional development is also a good way to achieve student centered learning and thus enhance student academic performance.

List of References


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