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Positive Impacts of TILT: Two Professors' Journeys in Creating More Student-Centered Teacher Education Courses

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Abstract

As the K-12 classroom changes to support the needs of our ever-changing society, so should the teacher education courses change on the university level. Additionally, the focus on higher education has become more student-centered with an emphasis on transparency in learning and teaching (TILT). The purpose of this article is to highlight the positive experiences two teacher education professors had using TILT to examine assignments and course syllabi at the college level. The journey of developing transparent assignments and student-centered syllabi is time-consuming, challenging, and on-going, but the benefits of a student-centered classroom are invaluable.

As former middle school teachers and leaders now serving as assistant professors of education, we continue to see the need for equipping our preservice teachers in ways which will provide them with the greatest opportunities to succeed. As the K-12 classroom changes to support the needs of our ever-changing society, so should the teacher education courses that we teach on the university level change.

Recently the focus within higher education has become more student-centered with an emphasis on transparency in learning and teaching (TILT). One of the main goals of TILT is “promoting students’ conscious understanding of how they learn” (Winkelmes, 2013, p. 6). College students are more successful when they are aware and responsible for their learning; therefore, involving them in the construction of the learning process is becoming more prevalent.

This process can begin by building relationships with students. Meier and Gasoi (2017) speak to the importance of developing relationships with students stating, “Over the years I have learned that sustaining a democratic culture depends on building practices that enable us all to develop strong habits of heart and mind through frequent association with one another” (p. 23). Therefore, learning should not only be transparent, but also personal. Improving student-teacher relationships begins with understanding the learner, acknowledging the learner’s role, and encouraging frequent teacher-student conversations about learning and assignments. Winkelmes (2013) states teachers should be engaging their students in conversations about their perceptions of learning. This process leads to improvements in students’ learning on their own and knowing how to apply their learning in different situations (Winkelmes et al., 2016). These findings have encouraged us to develop

relationships and be more transparent in our teaching while also creating assignments that are student-centered and provide clear expectations.

During our initial years as classroom teachers, building relationships with students was not a top priority. Our attention and efforts were concentrated around making sure we were covering the standards and goals as prescribed by the state and district. Discipline overpowered relationship-building especially when the progress of teaching lessons associated with the standards was affected. Our motives and intentions were genuine, and our goals were not to be the dictator of the classroom, but we lacked the confidence, time, and assurance required to move towards a deeper relationship with our students and truly understanding who they were as learners.

Consequently, teaching middle school students almost always required more than surface-level teaching and learning. Our students challenged us daily to respond to critically important questions such as: Why are we doing this? Why should we have to learn this material? How will this help me when I become an adult? At first, these questions prompted defensiveness, but looking back, these questions are the heart of a student-centered classroom. Many of these same ideas that middle school students are wanting to understand are the same skills that the TILT framework is promoting and improving (Winkelmes et al., 2016). College students exposed to the TILT intervention reported they knew the purpose and benefits of their assignments improving their learning outcomes (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Therefore, we realized even our middle school experiences showed the need to develop lessons and units with an emphasis on learners and relevance as opposed to being

a traditional teacher focusing solely on preparing students for an exam (Peer & Martin, 2005). Hence, as we strive to become better educators, we see the need in becoming facilitators of learning empowering students to become informed about their courses and take responsibility of their own learning. Subsequently, the students become the center of the classroom.

Student-Centered vs. Teacher-Centered Teaching

Research has confirmed the importance of a student-focused classroom which theorists have referred to as elements within progressive education (Giroux, 2014; Hiltz et al., 2007). Progressive education was introduced by John Dewey and others opposed to traditional models during the early 20th century. Similar to the TILT framework, progressive education focuses on the learner and their needs with the main goal of making the learning experience more practical and meaningful to students. Additionally, progressive educational strategies have students working collaboratively on projects and critically thinking together on ways to solve complex problems that can easily be found in real world experiences (Dewey, 1902). Progressive educators provide opportunities for informal and formal interactions not only between the teacher and student but also, and more importantly, students conversing with other students (Dewey, 1938). These strategies develop a classroom environment where the students feel appreciated, worthy, and a part of the learning process. Their feelings and feedback become a natural part of the conversation.

Conversely, traditional education is more teacher focused (Noddings, 2005). Examples of traditional education in a

classroom include instruction taught directly from instructors to students who remain quiet, taking copious notes with little or no interaction. Traditional education strategies may include lectures, students outlining textbook chapters, and copying notes from a whiteboard. The idea behind traditional education is that the instructor is the keeper of all knowledge and students are seen as sponges expected to absorb all information originating from the instructor (Eisner, 1998). Within traditional classrooms, one might typically see students sitting quietly in straight rows providing optimal conditions to receive direct instruction from an instructor. The focus is not on what the students want, need, or think. In the traditional classroom, the teacher is an integral part of the learning process minimizing the students' responsibility in their own learning.

Being transparent in the classroom can provide students with what they need to be successful. Like progressive education, the TILT initiative encourages conversations and interactions among teachers and students to better understand learning processes (Winkelmes, 2013). Assignments are also presented in a transparent format providing students with the purpose and criteria highlighting the relevance of the assignment and encouraging students to self-evaluate. As in progressive education, students are connecting their assignments to real-world experiences, as well as using critical thinking skills to self-evaluate and determine if they have met the criteria. In the TILT framework, students are also encouraged to work with their peers to apply learning and complete tasks. Implementation of the TILT model has seen success with students reporting an increase in their understanding of assignments, as well as critical thinking skills (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Students also report significant benefits in discussions

regarding learning goals and rationales, as well as the benefits of working with their peers (Winkelmes, 2013). It appears the empowerment progressive education and the TILT framework provide in allowing students to become an integral part of the learning process includes successful practices we want to implement in our current college classes.

Transparent Assignments

After years of teaching, we espouse progressive education over a more traditional approach. Lecture and note taking methodology have not been effective learning strategies as hoped. Instead of students feeling they are a part of the learning process, many have expressed a sense of disconnect between theoretically skewed lessons and practical applications that might benefit them as future educators. Fortunately, there exists a plethora of opportunities to aid teachers in this transition not only in the K-12 arena, but also at the undergraduate and graduate levels of academia (Giroux, 2014). We began our focus on student-centered teaching with a focus on the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) method (O'Brian et al., 2008; Winkelmes, 2013) with the Dewey endorsed methodology espoused by progressive educators dating back to the early 20th century. TILT has impacted our preparation for teaching in providing more details and depth of student expectations when submitting assignments. We learned that through TILT, we were able to structure assignments with the students' language and understanding in mind and provide specific details the students needed to be successful. In the process of making our assignments more transparent, we also confirmed our belief in the importance of rubrics giving students what was expected of them to be successful.

In our experience with TILT, we have seen the importance of making the assignment more “real” for the students. Historically, this has been our weak point as professors, and the TILT framework has provided the encouragement to make assignments more practical and crucial in their future roles as teachers. In our education courses, we have used the TILT framework to modify lesson plan assignments providing the students with concrete examples. We have also created assignments where students create written feedback for their future students, as well as developing assessments. With each of these assignments, we used the TILT framework to develop a relevant purpose, clear directions, and appropriate criteria so our students could be successful in our college classes and use their new skills in the P-12 classroom. TILT research highlights the benefits among college students, especially low-income, underrepresented students in predicting success and confidence (Winkelmess et al., 2016). The idea that TILT gives all teachers, as well as professors, a rationale for students to gain clarity and insight into why an assignment has been given along with an underlying theme and importance is empowering. TILT has and will continue to challenge us as professors to bring clarity to our students using this progressive teaching method preparing them for their future roles as educators.

Our students have responded appreciatively to our work towards making assignments more transparent, noting the clarity and additional details provided with each assignment as key factors in their success. Students have also expressed appreciation towards being presented with a criteria or rubric for grading and have made positive comments about the exemplars provided with assignments. Although we had been providing rubrics and, on occasion,

exemplars of previous work samples performed by previous students, the TILT methodology made us more cognizant of our efforts to provide transparency for students to succeed. While we were aware that providing exemplars could reduce creativity and the students’ ability to produce their own ideas, the positive feedback we have gotten from our “TILTed” assignments outweighs these risks. Students have commented on how clear the directions are, on how they clearly understand what is expected of them and enjoy understanding the purpose behind the assignments they work so hard to complete. Students have stated how prepared they feel as future teachers, and plan to incorporate the TILT framework with their classroom as well. Consequently, we have seen the students’ grades improve when the assignments were modified to be more transparent, and exemplars were provided. We have seen the benefits of our work with TILT and will continue assessing our course assignments and modifying them to fit our students’ needs.

Student-Centered Syllabi

Because of the success we had seen with TILT in our course assignments, we decided to next examine the transparency in our syllabi. The syllabus can be the first interaction between the professor and student and provides the student with a “first impression” of the course and teacher. According to Peer and Martin (2005), a student-centered syllabus should “establish a clear description of the student role in the learning process and the expectations and values of the faculty member” (p. 1). We believe a transparent syllabus should be one that provides maximum clarity for the students to comprehend. The expectations of the course and its instructor should not only be included, but it is one that provides greater

opportunities for the students to be more successful as they progress further and deeper into the material. The syllabus should also have an inviting tone while acknowledging the student as an active participant whose thoughts and input are critical ingredients for the overall success of the course. To create a more student-centered syllabus, Richmond (2016) provided six steps to help with improving classroom syllabi. First, he suggested evaluating current syllabi and identifying areas that need improvement. Then, instructors should develop a plan on how to improve certain elements, experiment and make changes, and then allow other colleagues to assess the new syllabi. Richmond concludes by repeating these steps and never stop, because as educators we could always do better. With these goals in mind, we began to reflect and make changes to our syllabi.

We first wanted to provide clarity in our syllabi with a focus on a student-centered classroom (O'Brian et al., 2008). We revised multiple components of the syllabi to include more student-friendly language with an inviting tone including attendance policies and evaluation measures. We also added sections regarding the students' role in the classroom and learning, as well as the teachers' roles in the course. Course objectives were revised to become more meaningful to the students with clear connections to assignments and evaluations. Other changes to the syllabi came from discussions we had with our students. We asked our preservice teachers to respond to several questions including: What is one component of the class that has helped me the most as a future teacher? What is your main concern in teaching science/reading as an elementary school teacher? Coming into the class, what did you hope to have as a takeaway that will help you upon entering the

classroom? Students stated the most helpful things were the conversations regarding assignments and hands-on learning. These components improved their learning and better prepared them for classroom experiences. Their responses were most enlightening, and the students shared significant and practical responses to the questions posed. In collecting these data, we were able to incorporate the students' perspectives and language in our syllabi.

In our research to develop more student-centered syllabi, we acknowledged the need for this process to take several semesters to complete so we could continue to collect student feedback (Peer & Martin, 2005). The feedback we received in the first semester was very positive. Because the language in the syllabi was more inviting, the students said it was easier to read and understand. They mentioned the course policies had more meaning behind them, the course evaluations were clearer, and overall, the syllabus was a more useful document for the entire semester. Students stated, "I understand what is expected of me," "I like the easy-to-read format," and "I actually might use this document the whole semester." More importantly, the conversations we had with the students regarding the syllabi changes highlighted our purpose of emphasizing the learner more, and our students appreciated our need to gather their input in making future changes to the syllabi. In similar research, Shugurova (2020) states that gathering student feedback is "highly engaging because the process generates enthusiasm, excitement, and passion. Even those students who struggle to find any meaning in this process feel that this sense of engagement is at the heart of co-construction" (p. 10). As we move forward, our students' involvement and feedback in the changes we make to syllabi and assignments will be a

critical part in the process. Their role in the learning process has become our priority.

Conclusion

We realize this journey of developing transparent assignments and student-centered syllabi is time-consuming, challenging, and on-going. Each semester, we will have new learners with different needs and learning styles. We will also be constantly changing course assignments to meet the needs of our ever-changing society, so we can fully prepare our students as classroom teachers. In today's K-12 classroom, teachers need to be flexible and adaptable (Duncan & Redwine, 2019). Pre-service teachers will be expected to conduct a learner-centered classroom; therefore, their pedagogy courses in their undergraduate programs should be designed in this manner. We should be providing transparency and student-centered instruction. Furthermore, our pre-service teachers should see the importance of learning more about their students, developing positive relationships in the classroom, and involving students in the co-creation of course materials. If we continue to conduct our college courses in this manner, we can appreciate two benefits. First, our pre-service teachers will be exposed to these learner-centered behaviors, preparing them to be successful educators. Second, our own teaching practices will improve as we make the learner the center of our teaching.

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