

## Learner Centered Classrooms

by Beth Hammett

Learner centered classrooms are often described by onlookers as chaotic get-togethers where students seem to be doing more socializing than learning. Those running learner centered classrooms know this is far from true, and, in fact, 2004 Rice Pre-AP Institute reports “students retain 90% of learning taking place in hands-on classrooms versus 5% of lecture driven classrooms.”

Think back to your own school experiences. Which classes did you enjoy? Are there lessons you remember due to learning concepts through songs, poetry, acronyms, or projects? If so, did you enjoy your learning experiences more or less than traditional lecture classes? Did you learn from your teachers and from your peers?

Leading child psychologist Piaget reiterates “children learn from one another through socialization.” Collaborative groups help children to develop social skills and to learn from each other. Helping students to see different viewpoints and to negotiate with others on projects are skills needed throughout life—learner centered classrooms develop such skills.

What is the first step in developing learner centered classrooms? Choices—students need input in classroom decisions such as rule making, novels to be read, and projects for assessment purposes. Students love helping! Bulletin boards, overheads, writing assignments on the boards, and leading classes in group discussions are all items students can take ownership of.

Rule making is the first step in having a learner centered classroom. Let students have a voice the first week of school by developing their own classroom rules. Of course, there are some school rules which cannot be changed, but classroom rules can be flexible.

Some include: taking off shoes, carrying backpacks to desks, chewing gum or bringing snacks, raising hands to answer questions, cell phones....

Begin the week by reading aloud *The Secret Knowledge of Grown-ups* by David Wisniewski to students. Next, have students choose a school rule to expand. Be creative! Are there students who could illustrate the rules while some write? This could begin your cooperative learning groups. And who knew parents wanted us to drink milk because atomic purple cows would explode if we didn't? Sure, it sounds silly, but seeing rules from a different point of view will help students understand the need for guidelines.

If you are teaching a unit with a class novel included, could you begin with literature clubs? For example, a unit on science experiments could begin by students choosing from a variety of novels on leading scientists. Three to four similar novels are needed for literature clubs to get started. Scholastic Books allow teachers to earn points for book club sets by taking monthly book orders. Garage sales are another option for cheap, used books. Try library book sales as well. Libraries generally hold sales at least once a year. Harvey Daniels' *Literature Circles* [1571103333:Product Link on Barnes & Noble.com](https://www.barnesandnoble.com/product/1571103333). can help you get started, or try [www.literaturecircles.com](http://www.literaturecircles.com) for literature club ideas and handouts.

Projects are the first items teachers think of when speaking of learner centered classrooms. Many different groups working on various projects do seem chaotic, but each group becomes an expert group on a specific project and, therefore, can answer future questions for others wanting to duplicate the projects. As the teacher, you are the facilitator, or coach. You travel from one group to the next making notes, reflecting, listening, helping when needed, and observing. Trial and error will occur, and students quickly take ownership in their projects. Be sure to include a day to share and ask questions. Students can grade others' projects by building a generic class rubric beforehand. After all, shouldn't students know how to receive an A on their projects?

Placing power in the hands of students is a positive experience. Explanations, debates, and discussions increase students' learning, and you will quickly see students' interests in

topics blossom. Learner centered classrooms will change you and your students' viewpoints on learning.