Implementing Learner-Centered Activities

By Dr. Erin Bell, CETL Staff

Many are familiar with the shift from an instructor-centered classroom model to a learner-centered schema. Learner-centered instruction places the onus on both student and instructor, rather than the instructor filling the role of a "sage on the stage." In such a constructivist learning paradigm, student learners *construct* knowledge instead of passively receiving information, allowing them to take an active role in the meaning-making process. Learner-centered techniques and lessons cultivate student responsibility for their own learning.

Maryellen Weimer is a frequently cited expert regarding learner-centered techniques. In her *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice* (2002) Weimer notes that such strategies can open and legitimize students' interactions with the curriculum. "According to constructivist theories, students need not wait until they have developed expertise before they interact with content. They are encouraged to explore it, handle it, relate it to their own experience, and challenge it whatever their level of expertise. . . the goal is to involve students in the process of acquiring and retaining information" (Weimer, 13).

Learner-centered strategies, according to Weimer (2002), suggest that learners share the responsibility to organize content, solve problems, and ask more questions, among other activities. As such, students take part in the discovery process, allowing for more robust discussion sessions and metacognitive practices to develop. Such strategies lead faculty to perform and use more modes of formative feedback, so that students can learn and grow from their mistakes.

The following is a list of some learner-centered activities you may wish to explore in your courses. Such activities can be deployed in all modalities. When deploying learner-centered activities It is important to begin with your objectives and outcomes (i.e., "what do I want students to learn and accomplish") and subsequently plan activities around those goals.

Collaborative Writing and Design Projects

Objective: students engage with classmates in a course to plan and produce a formal project such as an essay, a research poster, a slide show, a group speech, a proposal, etc. Such collaboration allows students to understand group dynamics, planning, and team building. Students can discuss their strengths and assign team roles (such as writer, designer, copy editor) accordingly. Collaborative writing projects reinforce the notion that we are always

writing for an audience and help student writers see the value of the revision and editing process.

Concept Mapping

Objective: After students explore content in a particular unit, they will identify a main concept and explore it by visually mapping it out. Students can work together (such as on a white board in the face-to-face setting or via a program like Google Draw online) to explore and categorize information relating to the main concept and to build connections between components. Such visual representations can take many forms including: graphic organizers, Venn Diagrams, and other charts. Concept maps can help students analyze information, compare concepts and ideas, and plan out formal projects (like an essay). There are numerous free mapping applications available online.

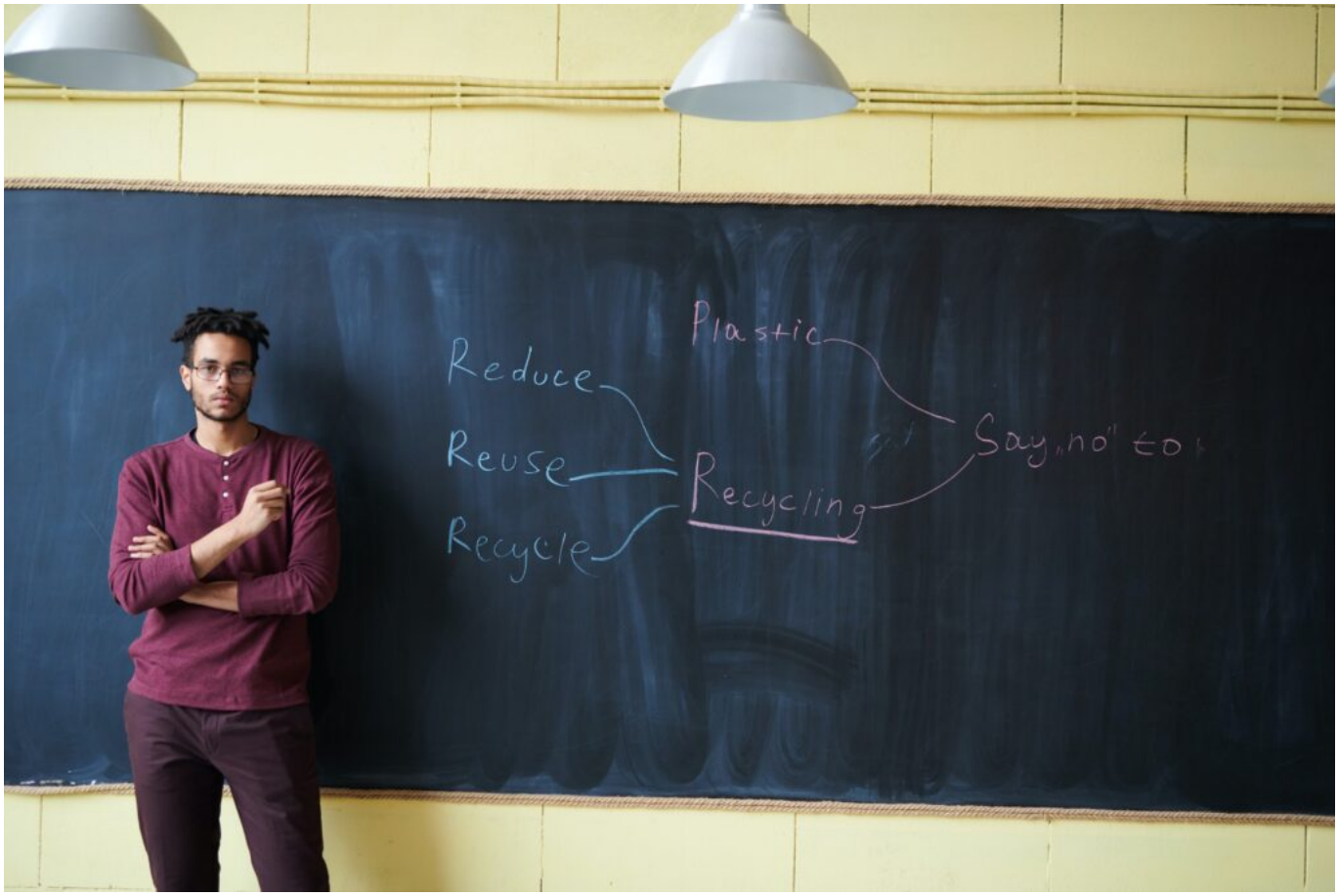

Photo courtesy of **fauxels** from **Pexels**.

Entrance and Exit Slips

Objective: Entrance and exit slips can help professors gauge students' working knowledge of a topic or concept before and after a course session begins. Entrance tickets are short

written assignments that grant students a space and place to show, demonstrate and share information. They can be an excellent means of checking in regarding assigned readings/assignments and determining what concepts students found most challenging. Exit tickets are typically assigned at the end of a course session. They are also typically a brief series of questions that allow students to demonstrate how well they understood material in a course session.

Game and Quiz Applications

Objective: Online educational game apps. can be used for a variety of purposes, including reviewing, matching, and defining key concepts. Such applications can serve as a mode of formative assessment as students move toward application and analysis of content and information. Students can also easily create and share their own games (with instructor guidance) to lead class sessions and discussions. Use Kahoot, Quizlet or other (free) online gaming apps to help students review key concepts.

Pair/Share/Present

Objective: In this activity, students are responsible for exploring and sharing course content rather than obtaining the information via instructor presentation/lecture. Students may be assigned key areas to study and research. Students will then teach back key concepts to their classmates. Students may design a brief slide (or slideshow) to share with the class. The instructor serves as a guide and facilitator to augment any presentations that may require additional information.

Peer Review and Feedback

Objective: Peer review helps students use meta-cognition to think about the choices that they made in a writing project. Peer review can be implemented through several methods. While students may be asked to print off a copy of an essay for peer review, there are several ways that they can share projects digitally (Blackboard has a peer review option, but students can email projects to their peers or share documents through MS Office). Peer review allows for the analysis of others' writing but it also leads to reflection about one's own writing practices.

Rubric Creation

Objective: Rather than providing a project rubric for students, the instructor and students construct a rubric together. By creating a rubric for a project with the instructor, students analyze and understand what key outcomes they are meant to meet in each project and they engage in higher order thinking such as critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation. Creating rubrics with students clarifies the expectations for an assignment and checks for their

understanding of the components of the assignment.

Student Created-Study Guides

Objective: Students will move beyond remembering and understanding concepts and content by analyzing information in a unit and preparing and sharing a study guide. Students use meta-cognition to discuss and decide what concepts will warrant further investigation and discussion.

Student-Led Course Conferences

Objective: Students move beyond remembering and understanding information to create new content and materials based on their course work. After finishing a summative assessment such as a final essay or multi-media project, students revise materials to ready them for an in-class conference presentation. Students can create panels with their classmates based on similar subject matter, create short abstracts for their presentations, and engage in question-and-answer sessions after each presentation.

Surveys and Polls

Objective: Surveys and polls can be used for a variety of purposes in the classroom, from having students demonstrate that they can recall and define information, to allowing a space to compare and classify information about course content in a more open-ended question. Poll questions can be multiple choice while surveys may offer space for longer prompts. To make polling and surveying even more interactive, students may join their instructor in crafting questions to pose to their peers.

There are methods to employ surveys/polls in Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate and MS Office contains a Forms tool. There are also a number of free survey applications available online so that students can actively engage in real-time feedback and discussion sessions.