Introduction

A Model of Learner-Centered Instruction

Through others we become ourselves.

—Lev Vygotsky

❖ Comprehensive Student Success

Nine in ten American adults feel a failure to learn values, like honesty and respect, is a widespread problem, with a majority calling it very serious (Farkas & Johnson, 1997). Likewise, the majority of Black and Hispanic students feel there is a "very serious problem" with students' lack of respect for teachers (J. Johnson, Arumi, & Ott, 2006). Nearly 8 in 10 teachers attribute the lack of respect to a lack of family discipline requiring more management at school and to absorbing widespread cultural disrespect from the media and other outlets (Public Agenda Foundation, 2004). Perhaps more important, 95% of Americans feel schools should teach honesty and respect for all (J. Johnson & Immerwahr, 1994), and 93% of teachers and 88% of parents feel a school's mission should be to produce productive citizens in addition to teaching the three Rs (Public Agenda Foundation, 2004). Two-thirds of parents feel they have not been succeeding in helping their children develop adequate self-discipline, leaving an important gap for schools to fill (Public Agenda Foundation, 2004). In surveying nearly 1,000 teachers-in-training since 1999, Rubalcava (2005) found that they almost always hope their primary focus in teaching is to foster socialization, particularly communication and cooperation skills, or self-actualization, interacting with students as individuals to help them follow their unique paths of development. Although teachers-in-training value the themes of socialization and actualization most, they also value developing students' civic values as essential skills and content for contributing to the economy. In summary, most people want students to comprehensively succeed, not just be good test-takers in the three Rs.

We propose a holistic model of comprehensive success that is built on both engagement and achievement, believing social, self-regulating, and critical thinking skills and dispositions represent the ideal levels of these two broad goals. School is an important environment that can foster comprehensive growth in students and adults

alike. These processes of comprehensive success are consistent with the increasingly prevalent assertions from scholars and policy makers (e.g., J. Tomlinson, 1999), such as the findings in the *New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce Report* from the National Center on Education and the Economy (Knapp et al., 2006). The *New Commission* asserted the educational needs for the new interconnected global world would go beyond strong mathematics, reading, and writing skills. To succeed in the workforce of the 21st century,

> [learners will] have to be comfortable with ideas and abstractions, good at both analysis and synthesis, creative and innovative, self-disciplined and well organized, able to learn very quickly and work well as a member of a team and have the flexibility to adapt quickly to frequent changes. (p. 8)

Learners need a wide variety of rational, creative, emotional, interpersonal, and behavioral capacities to succeed. In an ideal educational system, teachers, administrators, and students are learning together—along with parents and community members—in interdependent, interpersonal, and personal ways (McCombs & Miller, 2007; Wheatley & Frieze, 2007).

Listening to Student, Teacher, and Parent Voices

What helps students and all learners to comprehensively grow and succeed? An innovative study, aptly named *Voices From the Inside* (Poplin & Weeres, 1992), asked virtually everyone associated with four urban and suburban public schools, representative of most Americans, what they thought about their schools. When we say everyone, we mean it: the students of all ages, the teachers, the custodians, cafeteria workers, administrators, parents, and other community members. The researchers spent 18 months, including 160 meetings; 24,000 pages of transcripts, journals, drawings, and essays; and hundreds of hours of tape to identify the problems of schooling. This study can be said to be not just student centered, but also teacher centered, parent centered, staff centered, researcher centered, and policy-maker centered. In the sense that everyone associated with these schools was trying to discover, or learn what can help improve schooling, the study was truly learner centered.

Poplin and Weeres (1992) found that relationships, especially teacher–student relationships, are the biggest issue on everyone's mind. The next largest problem was the need for increased understanding and dialogue about diversity, particularly racial and economic diversity and to a lesser extent gender, among all community members. Problems related to diversity are essentially problems related to relationships, relationships between groups of people, not just individuals. Longitudinal studies support these main findings of the *Voices From the Inside* study. Cooperation and positive relationships have been among the most consistent fundamentals found to predict resilience (buoyancy and ability to recover from change or stress) in children and adults across cultural groups (Borman & Overman, 2004; Glantz & Johnson, 1999;

Pianta, 1996). Our book's premise is that an effective way to reform schools is to foster facilitative, principled, and instructionally flexible relationships, especially between teachers and students, but also between all players in education.

Importantly, and perhaps surprisingly to readers, in the *Voices* study, low test scores, violence, and higher dropout rates were not seen as the major problems in these schools. Poplin and Weeres (1992) discovered they were merely the consequences—consequences of a lack of meaningful relationships between all the participants of the school. Likewise, the researchers concluded regular conversations and emphasis must occur and be placed on relationships if schooling is to improve. Poplin and Weeres asserted any other approach will just treat the symptoms and not the problem itself.

Frequently, when "nice" practices, like teaching students about respect and relationships, are brought up in conversations about education, there is a prevailing social bias asserting that these practices must not be effective or worthwhile. This bias may be expressed as, "Toughness gets results; niceness does not. The world today is a tough, competitive place." While we acknowledge the world is in many respects tough and competitive and simply being nice is ineffective, we believe the rift between "nice" and "tough" is false. Part of the complexity of teaching in today's schools is dissolving these supposed dichotomies. Our model of learner-centered instruction (LCI) is about balancing challenge and empathy, high standards and high acceptance, achievement and enjoyment, as well as research and practice.

❖ A Model of Learner-Centered Instruction

Learner Centered: Myriad Meanings

The term *learner centered* has been used in many ways—most commonly, to distinguish an approach that is different, innovative, and potentially superior when compared to traditional practices in education. Table I.1 below lists some of the usages of learner-centered synonyms and practices in contrast with traditional ideas and practices. The left side of the table presents learner-centered aspects while the right side presents traditional aspects. Although we are aware that presenting these educational aspects and practices as opposites can hide many ways in which learner-centered and traditional approaches share similarities or may be combined for an effective educational approach, we also intend for the reader to draw from the table an emerging understanding of what we mean by learner centered. Sometimes learner centered evokes a lack of teacher-provided structure, especially when the term *child centered* is used. Although trust and nondirective or indirect facilitation are central to LCI, self-determination theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the model of teacher interpersonal behavior (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2006), and person-centered approaches (Bohart, 2006; T. G. Patterson & Joseph, 2007) assert that supporting learners' autonomy requires a balance of structure and freedom with both proximity and influence. We present Table I.1 to stimulate thought, inquiry, and dialogue about the congruence of educational goals with educational methods.

Table I.1   Learner-Centered Facets Contrasted With Traditional Facets

Learner-Centered Approaches	*Traditional Approaches*
Person centered	Curriculum centered
Self-directed	Teacher directed
Democratic	Hierarchical
Child centered	Teacher centered
Process (how)	Content (what)
Constructing understanding	Covering subject matter
Inquiry based	Knowledge based
Thinking	Memorizing
Relationship	Instruction
Experiential methods	Lecture
Cooperation	Competition or individualism
Active	Passive
Learning	Teaching
Criterion referencing	Norm referencing
Showing	Telling
Facilitating	Professing
Libratory pedagogy	Banking model

Learner-Centered Model Is Best Practice in Learning

Beginning in 1990, the American Psychological Association formed a Presidential Task Force to clarify how psychological knowledge helps learning and how to improve schools with this knowledge. What emerged, with the leadership of Barbara McCombs, was *Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: Guidelines for School Redesign and Reform* (LCPs), which has since been revised (APA Task Force, 1993; APA Work Group, 1997). The LCPs include four general areas: cognitive and metacognitive, motivational and affective, developmental and social, and individual differences. Likewise, the LCPs were created as a collection of evidenced-based principles that highlight the active and relational psychosocial and constructivist aspects of learning, which stand in contrast

to more traditional ideas of teaching that are focused more on the authoritative passing of knowledge to a passive, receptive student. Correspondingly, McCombs and Whistler (1997), and more recently McCombs and Miller (2007), describe an emerging theory of education known as the learner-centered model. The learner-centered model builds on the LCPs to focus on both the learner and the learning process. We believe these efforts have been helpful in broadening the conventional discussions of learner-centered instruction away from simple dichotomies toward the best, most pragmatic practices. In this sense, "learner-centeredness" may include many of the elements of traditional practice when they can help educational practice to focus on the central role of learners and learning.

The learner-centered model has been extensively researched since 1993, especially using the Assessment of Learner-Centered Practices (ALCP) (McCombs, 1999). Although different forms of the ALCP target different student levels and include several measures of student motivation, teacher beliefs, and positive teacher–student relationships, these forms all emphasize three principles of LCI: encouragement of meaningful and deep learning, challenging higher-order thinking, and adaptation to individual and cultural differences.

Learner-Centered Interpersonal Relationships Are Central

> *I have learned that more students than I thought dislike school because of the TEACHERS. I went into teaching because I wanted to make school a good place for students. When I was in high school, it seemed most teachers did not care about their students. It was my rationale that I would be different and make school a better place for students. Are my colleagues and I failing to do this?*

> —High school teacher, *Voices From the Inside*

Carl Rogers (1951, 1959) proposed that facilitative relationships characterized by empathy, acceptance, and honesty are the key to human growth and development. Nel Noddings (1984, 1992) proposed that a caring relation, or connection between persons, characterized by engrossed listening and perceived compassion, is central to the necessary moral purpose and evolution of schools. Related research in education, counseling, play, parenting, and other interpersonal endeavors have generally confirmed the salience of facilitative and caring relationships in human development and productivity (Aspy, Aspy, & Roebuck, 1984; Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005; Bruce & Levant, 1990; Carkhuff, 2000; Cornelius-White, 2007; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Elliott, Greenberg, & Lietaer 2004; Pianta, 1996; Wentzel, 2002). McCombs and Miller (2007) summarize much of this research, stating, "At its core, learning is relational in two ways: (1) individual learners attempt to make personal meaning from information and experiences and (2) strong student–teacher relationships provide a positive climate out of which natural learning and motivation emerge" (p. 8). Our model integrates the role of facilitative (empathic, accepting, and genuine) relationships with three principles of McCombs and colleagues' learner-centered model measured by the ALCP (encouragement, challenge, and adaptation) and a variety of instructional methods consistent with the learner-centered principles for comprehensive student success.

Figure I.1 shows how the three principles of encouragement, challenge, and adaptation bridge the core relational stance and ways of interacting. LCI involves relational ways of being, including warmth and respect for learners as people first, authenticity that teachers too are humbly learners and people first, and trust that people are fundamentally hardwired to learn. This relational, attitudinal orientation to instruction leads to ways of interacting, such as empathy and adaptation to each unique learner and his or her learning processes. These collective ways of "being in relationship" lead to the principled practice of encouragement and challenge, two key terms that summarize an approach to the use of a wide variety of specific instructional methods. Authentic, relevant learning endeavors, guided inquiries, cooperative learning, direct instruction, and other methods each have a vital role to play in a learner-centered classroom. Flexibility and differentiation to the needs of the students and situation is guided by the lived relationships in classrooms.

We used Figure I.1 earlier to propose that LCI aims for comprehensive student success, not just a change in "symptoms of schooling," such as an increase in test scores or a decrease in dropout rates. Our model of LCI acknowledges relational influence is

Figure I.1   A Model of LCI: Facilitative Relationships and Principled Utilization of Congruent Instructional Methods
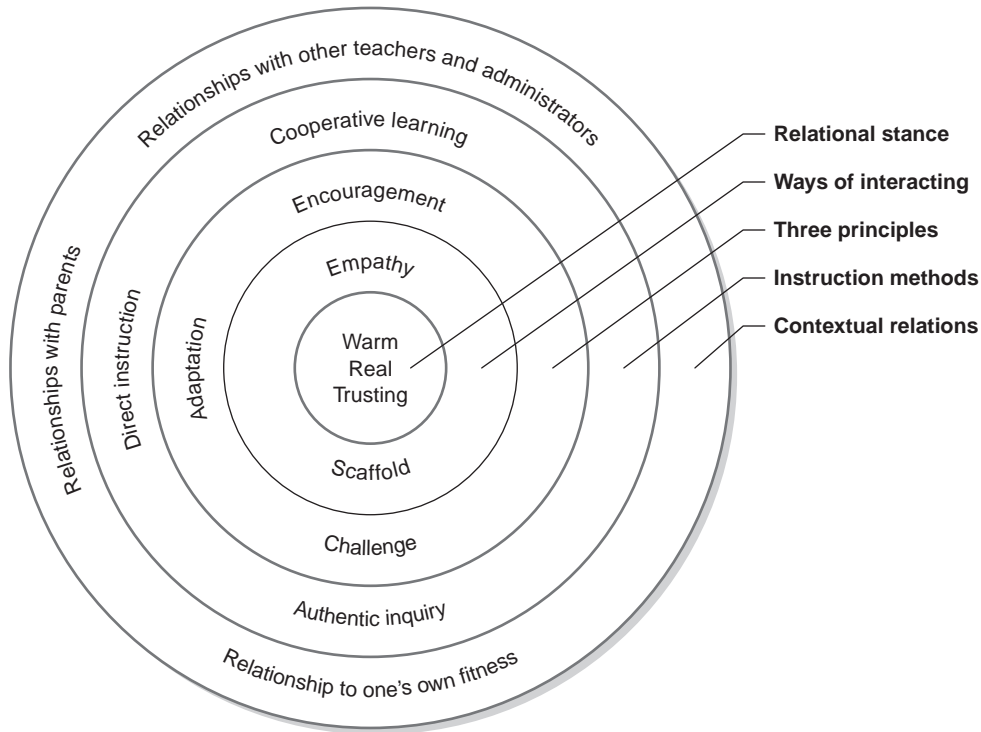
bidirectional or **reciprocal**; that is, student success can foster better teacher relationships and instructional methods even as teachers foster student success. **Learner-centered instruction (LCI)** is defined as an approach to teaching and learning that prioritizes facilitative relationships, the uniqueness of every learner, and the best evidence on learning processes to promote comprehensive student success through engaged achievement.

❖ An Invitation to Improve How You Learn

One of the most important things you can do to learn something is to prepare, study, and review as a proactive process, especially the same day or time period that you learned of it. As we stress throughout this book, the more active learners are in constructing their learning, the better. Every time you study is an opportunity to learn to study more effectively even as every time learners learn, they can improve how they learn. Use this chance to improve your study skills and find resources and handouts to give your students. Check back to this introduction or the glossary to assess how well you are improving your ability to learn as you move through the chapters.

One of the easiest places to look to better learn is on the Internet. Type "study methods" or "study skills" into any search engine, and you will find tens of millions of entries. Weimer's (2002) text *Learner-Centered Teaching* provides six handouts for use in helping to build study skills and self-regulated learning in higher education (though some are applicable with students younger than that). Or consult the journal or Web site of *The Teaching Professor* (www.teachingprofessor.com) for ongoing ideas and discussion. Lest you be disappointed, we will suggest a few ways for you to approach and review this book, but most important is that you ask and pursue the questions and answers of how you can best learn now and in the future. In other words, we suggest you take this opportunity to use the scaffolding that is this book to construct and reconstruct stable, long-lasting teaching and learning foundations.

You might consider the experience of learning and building learner-centered practices as a whole. While reading, what relationships are you building for your success? Are you using the book as part of a class, study group, or mentoring program? If so, did you make a solid, positive, fun, or otherwise rewarding relationship with your instructor, mentor, or your peers? Are you keeping a journal or sharing things you are learning with a partner? Will you discuss changes in your beliefs or how you interacted with learners? Can you notice how you are changing in interacting with your children, parents, family, or friends during this time?

Focus back and forth from the specific to the general. After reading through technical or detailed passages, take a moment to mull over some of the book's main themes and how each of these relates to your own learning and teaching:

- teachers as facilitators of learning and learner development;
- empirical and theoretical bases for LCI;
- core relational characteristics of warmth, trust, empathy, and authenticity;
- engagement as learning outcome and process, with social connections and self-regulation as optimal signs of engagement;

- classroom management as influence and proximity, attractive power, and shared control and choice;
- encouragement, challenge, and adaptation for learning, thinking, and differentiation;
- ways achievement can be redefined to include both the basics (three Rs) and critical and creative problem identifying and solving;
- relevant, inquiring topics, assignments, and projects;
- relationships built between learners through cooperative learning; and
- relationships built beyond the classroom to support the classroom.

Periodically, flip through the pages and look ahead at the headings in each chapter. You can spend 10 minutes or 10 hours in this process, but give yourself multiple exposures with different degrees of attention to see what you know or remember, what you still do not understand, or what you want to learn more about. Make up additional questions, outlines, or figures. Consider the various methods you could use if you were an instructor using this textbook with your class to facilitate students looking forward and looking back, all the while being engaged in the present. Ideally, LCI can help lead to learners and teachers alike sharing their roles. Learners build social and self-regulating skills to achieve in sustainable and creative ways. Let the student become the master, and the master the student!

Every aspect of this book is designed with you and your comprehensive success in mind. We will share much of our understanding of research and theory about what often helps people learn, but at its core, this book is for you to develop a way of being, teaching, and learning that will help learners succeed. We hope you will accept our invitation to engage in this development.

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SUMMARY

This chapter introduced the central concept of learner-centered instruction (LCI), an ethical and interpersonal endeavor, which is best pursued with an eye toward comprehensive student success. We introduced our model of LCI, emphasizing classroom and contextual relationships, learning principles, and the flexible differentiation of instruction utilizing methods such as inquiry, cooperative learning, and direct instruction. The introduction concluded with a suggested study guide in the form of an invitation to readers to improve their ability to learn while engaging this book. In the next chapter, we will give an overview of the research on relationships and principles central to LCI.