UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

You Think You Know: Where Learner-Centered Pedagogy Meets Management

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6kt2p027

ISBN

9798892555401

Author

Galoozis, Elizabeth

Publication Date

2024-10-14

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

1

You Think You Know

Where Learner-Centered Pedagogy Meets Management

Elizabeth Galoozis

During the interview for my current position, I drew a connection between learner-centered teaching, with which I was very familiar, and person-centered management, which was newer to me. Although I'd read about this connection (Edmondson, 1999; Finkelstein, 2018), I had yet to live it. This chapter is about the gap between knowing and experiencing this connection, how it took me by surprise, and what I've learned in my first management role.

THE EASE OF CENTERING MYSELF

I had early experiences with learner-centered teaching as a learner and with person-centered management as a worker, though I didn't have the vocabulary to describe them at the time. For example, I experienced learner-centered teachings as a high school student in Patty Morris's AP US History class twenty-five years ago. Ms. Morris empowered her students to generate our own understandings of political and historical moments. We held our own constitutional convention, produced 1850s-era newspapers, and studied our own cultural context through choosing music to research. Ms. Morris enthusiastically invited us to participate in what education researcher Lisa Goldstein (1999) calls *co-construction*

of mind, bringing meaningful interpersonal interaction into the learning process. (I'm not alone in this assessment; other alumni and I quote Ms. Morris's lessons and concepts to each other to this day, and she has been recognized for her stellar teaching [Tungate, 2011]).

On the management side, I was lucky to have an excellent manager early on. I worked part-time in a small nonprofit library while I attended library school. My manager, Tracy O'Brien, took time to explain the rationale behind the library's processes and policies and asked for my input when developing new ones—modeling co-construction of mind in the workplace. She learned about and centered my interests when inviting me to events and meetings—not overwhelming me with information but allowing me to chart my own professional development. Tracy treated me as a partner in the processes of work and learning, and I thrived in the environment she created.

These experiences informed my approach to teaching, and to improving my teaching, in my information literacy instruction. By 2021 I felt comfortable in the classroom, had shared my accumulated experience and expertise with other teaching librarians through coordination and leadership, and found myself wanting to formally manage others. I entered my first management role thinking I would be an effective manager by applying what had worked for me as a worker. My thinking was person-centered but centered on one person—me! Only through experience, and mistakes, did I come to understand that what worked for me about Ms. Morris's and Tracy's approaches was that I had been given space to center my individual motivations and passions. Projecting my own preferences onto students was something I'd outgrown in the classroom but fell back on in my early days as a manager.

One of the challenges of most (one-shot) library instruction is the lack of time to develop long-term relationships with students. In management, however, I have more time to develop person-centered practices. Managing a small team has given me opportunities to try techniques I haven't been able to use in one-shot instruction sessions, but the stakes are also higher. Although I certainly hold a position of power in the library classroom, I also emphasize to students that I'm not giving them grades. Now I review my supervisees' performance and am responsible for supporting their success in a much different way.

THE HARD WORK OF CENTERING OTHERS

I offer here a few examples that highlight two components of person-centered management, included in the introduction to this book: authenticity and psychological safety.

One of the hardest lessons I've learned in managing others is, to paraphrase Goldstein (1999, p. 657), that what makes me feel cared for or supported is not necessarily what makes someone else feel that way. And as the editors of this book note in their introduction, "the needs of each individual must be surfaced and authentically considered" (Cook et al., 2024, p. tk). It sounds so obvious and simple, but in practice things play out differently.

For example: As both a learner and a worker, I appreciate minimal externally imposed structure. I enjoy creating my own structures and processes to manage time, projects, and information. I started out intending to be as hands-off a manager as possible, thinking that would signal trust to my supervisees and allow them flexibility. This strategy, once again, centered only myself. It also contradicted my teaching experience, as I generally provide more structure for first-year students than I do for seniors, recognizing that when I ask them to complete a task, they may have never done it before and may find structure helpful. I needed to remember that I had built my habits over years, often learning through trial and error or feedback. I had to hear from my direct reports that they needed and appreciated structure, especially earlier in their careers. I thought I was allowing them authenticity, when in reality I was imposing what felt authentic to me when I had been in their position.

Being authentic within a work team requires psychological safety, defined by organizational researcher Amy Edmondson (1999) as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (p. 350). However, Edmondson emphasizes, managers also cannot tacitly take this belief as a given and should openly discuss it with their teams; the process of making it explicit contributes to, rather than detracts from, creating psychological safety.

Creating a classroom environment that is safe for interpersonal risk taking is hard to do in one-shot library instruction. I try to do small things, like modeling to students that it's okay to make mistakes or

asking them to work in groups so risk is more distributed. With direct reports, I also try to model taking risks and mistakes and to distribute responsibility and risk. But I also have the benefit of more time to learn about what *safety* means to each person and what conditions create a safe environment. One example of something that doesn't really work in a one-shot but does within a work team is shared norms. In our team we created and agreed to norms for meeting and communication, and we review them annually to ensure they still work for everyone.

Another way I've tried to foster psychological safety is by creating an environment in which the people who report to me can bring as much or as little of themselves to work as they choose. It's important to me that sharing personal details with the team is framed as an invitation, not a demand. For example, in our first year, I included an opening question at the beginning of all of our meetings that could be answered at varying levels of vulnerability. Questions ranged from "What's one habit you've either adopted or broken?" to "What do you listen to in the car?" to "What are you looking forward to this week?" I was hesitant at first to make these questions part of our meetings, afraid the team would find the icebreaker-style questions cheesy or a waste of time. After a year I checked in with them to see if they wanted to continue and was surprised by their enthusiastic yeses. I believe this exercise helped us to get to know one another as human beings, feel safer sharing other kinds of vulnerability (like work-related mistakes), and understand one another's individual motivations and thought processes.

CONCLUSION

When I teach a library instruction session to first-year students using a learner-centered approach, I don't assume that students know, for example, what a scholarly journal is and why it exists. As we search for journal articles, I might discuss the structures of scholarly conversation and peer review to contextualize what we're finding or invite them to make observations. But when I became a manager, out of fear of seeming condescending, I didn't really discuss with my team the structures of our specific workplace or workplaces in general, such as organizational culture and library-wide communication. As with scholarly

communication, these structures can be critiqued or even dismantled, but it's not possible to do that before learning about them. In glossing over these metacognitive conversations, I was prioritizing my fear over the team's needs.

As I write this conclusion, I'm simultaneously preparing to onboard a new team member and teaching a short course about instruction. In the course I give examples that treat employee training as a form of teaching; in the onboarding plan I have tried to illuminate the structures and culture of our workplace. In reflecting on the connections between learner-centered teaching and person-centered management, I've enriched my understanding of both and become a stronger manager. A new challenge will be creating psychological safety in a team where two of us know each other well and a third person is new. Not only do I feel more confident about applying what I've learned, but I'm also much more willing to say, "I thought I knew, but I didn't."

REFERENCES

Cook, D. B., Kirker, M. J., & Smothers, D. (2024). Introduction. In D. B. Cook, M. J. Kirker, & D. Smothers (Eds.), *Person-centered management in academic libraries* (pp. xi–xx). ALA Editions.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 44*(2), 350–383. https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999

Finkelstein, S. (2018). The best leaders are great teachers. *Harvard Business Review,* 54–58.

Goldstein, L. S. (1999). The relational zone: The role of caring relationships in the co-construction of mind. *American Educational Research Journal, 36*(3), 647–673. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312036003647

Tungate, M. (2011). Good teaching transcends changes, Hall of Fame inductees say. *Kentucky Teacher.* www.kentuckyteacher.org/features/2011/03/good-teaching-transcends-changes-hall-of-fame-inductees-say/