

What would a student-centred institution look like?

Alana Boyd 26 March 2010.

I have been invited here today as a learner, not with a background in academia or even a claim to having a black belt in study skills, but as a typical student who feels the struggles each day, as we learn our basic life skills in this big scary institution that for me, is university, before the real world. You will identify my approach is purely unscientific, and is the observations of a sometimes struggling student more than an accomplishing one.

Let me set the scene. I'm a commerce student and in my classes we are taught that cutting edge companies determined to gain a market share streamline all of their efforts in every department to have a customer integrated approach, where the satisfaction of the end user is the central focus of all of the companies endeavours and their measure of success. These companies create a customer experience with intrinsic value attached to the product in whatever shape or form.

Tertiary institutions now consider themselves as being in the industry of education running by a business model for sustainability and a balance in the supply and demand curve.

This prop that I bought along today represents us, the learners as the customers, the main stakeholders in the institution, and represents our needs that are to be identified and met.

I see the ideal learning centred environment being something that instils a sense of purpose to it's learners, the feeling that their contribution is important whether for a company, a government, and NGO, a community, or a household. Learners feel engaged, passion is induced, perceptions challenged and new opportunities sought.

So, are we doing these things well? Is the customer satisfied?

How does our institution, PTE, polytechnic, or learner environment, whether in the liberal arts, vocational training, academic or basic literacy and numeracy - have the learner at it's core? Or has the business of teaching taken over and the needs of an apathetic audience been twisted to now be not an experience but something to be ticked off the box? I think that the universities, while successfully putting structures in place to ensure the monetary benefit of their business model, have failed to recognise the other part of the equation – the value-adding part. Value is being removed as “cost saving initiatives” and yet they still insist on pretending they can play with the big boys in the moneymaking industry while failing to acknowledge one of the most essential offerings in the product equation. Some piece of the puzzle has been left behind somewhere, and it is time that we held someone accountable for what is a change in culture and mindset. My shopping trip is becoming more philosophical now, but I wish to be assured that these things are taken into consideration, as we decide the future mind set, the big picture, from which our smaller decisions are made.

Teachers have power in the facilitation of learning environments, but they are not the only ones, students have it too. With power comes responsibility and it is this responsibility that is a shared aspect between student and teacher in their learning environment. How is this culture of self-responsibility and attitude towards learning fostered in your environment?

International Accreditation

The international currency of our degrees is important, but at what price do we need to pay for it? In order to gain international accreditation a series of boxes must be ticked. This is all very well and good, but the way that it is being translated to our courses means that our opportunism and choices are becoming narrower, more mandatory time is devoted to doing what someone else says we must do rather than what we want to do. I am questioning the way in which the supposed requirements of the international

accreditation bodies are implemented, and mourn the fact that we are losing the renaissance men and women, whose transferable skills cross a wide variety of areas.

Ok, now for some practical things to put into my shopping trolley.

Customers come in all different shapes and sizes. How do you accommodate for them and their diverse learning needs? How nimble the teaching environment to these needs defines how learner centred the environment is.

Student engagement: What spaces are provided for peer-to-peer discussions? What space is provided for student to teacher interactions? We may seem shy, but we WANT these things, they help us to engage and learn. They help us to put things into context with the wider world, encourage debate and discussion and thus it makes sense that they have been proven to encourage retention of information.

For a university, how about lecture space?

Students generally will respond and understand a lecturer who is obviously passionate about their topic, who communicates it in easy language, and who we feel WANTS us to succeed. Please keep this in mind, and make sure that your learners feel engaged. How can you improve your delivery of information? The idea of lecture space is being debated I believe, and how it plays a part in being the most efficient form of information transfer and uptake. It may be the most efficient, but is it the most effective?

Social elements

How important is the social element of learning for a student?

Students relish the social life that being surrounded by like-minded people and I feel that this is yet another vehicle for learning, as we learn the intangible qualities of life that make us humans. And this is something that cannot be underestimated.

E-learning

This requires a lot of self-motivation but is effective. How can we integrate more of our learning online, in ways that engage learners, with out becoming too impersonal? Though, is this such a bad thing? With a shifting mindset towards e-based learning, if more information was available online and was utilised, it would add to the creation of a learning environment that surpassed just the walls of the classroom, and learning would be a way of life, in what ever shape or form this may be. An expanding world requires an expanding mindset in order to keep up, and teaching and learning as it fosters curiosity should be the climax of this.

Service- Learning

Has your institution looked into the possibility of service learning? Where students have the opportunity to apply what they are learning to real world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences in the community.

I feel that the basic importance of relationships and learning as a way of life are being lost in the current system. Yes, a business model ensures a sustainable future, but at the heart of the model should sit the learner and their needs in every aspect of the word, to be critical thinkers with a social conscience and a myriad of transferable skills to succeed.

And with that, I think, you are prepared, as producers, to identify and meet the needs of your consumers, the learners.