

Empowering Learners: Teaching American Literature by Shifting the Focus from the Instruction Paradigm to the Learning Paradigm

Dr. Nazmi Al-Shalabi

Department of English, The Hashemite University, Jordan.

E-mail: nazmi_shalabi@yahoo.com

Abstract

It is argued that learners have been so far exposed to the teaching paradigm, which justifies their being passive, incompetent, and hesitant to speak in class. So long as the world is rapidly changing and so is literacy, it is claimed that a parallel change should become of education via empowering students to enable them to learn American literature. The discussion demonstrates that empowering learners is central to voicing their opinions, contributing to class discussion, regaining their self-confidence, achieving their goals, satisfying their needs, and learning American literature. This study explores the value of empowering learners, and recommends that the focus be shifted to them to help them not only with learning American literature, but also becoming successful individuals who are confident of themselves as well as capable of contributing to developing their countries.

Empowerment as a term has been in educational literature for over thirty years. In *International Dictionary of Adult and Continuing Education*, Jarvis(1990) defines this term as “equipping and raising the confidence of individuals so they can become more successful learners”. Similar to Jarvis, Perkins and Zimmerman(1995) claim, in “Empowerment Theory, Research, and Application,” that empowerment is the process by which people gain control over their lives... a participation with others to achieve goals, an effort to gain access to resources, and some critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment” (570). Repeating Perkins and Zimmerman’s view, Kreisberg(1992) defines empowerment as people or groups gaining control over their own lives. Speaking of teachers, he notes that they occupy a painful dual role. In their relationships with students, “they are central figures of authority and control,” but when dealing with school administration and school districts, “they are remarkably isolated and often strikingly powerless” (9). Like Kreisberg, Boomer(1982) maintains that teachers can empower students by allowing them to “exercise their own powers and responsibilities” (3). Taken together, these arguments reveal that the teacher paradigm, where students, Aldrich(2009) argues, “are just passive receivers of knowledge” (57), and knowledge, Katsuko claims, “is passed from teacher to children” (quoted in Aldrich’s article p.57) is no longer acceptable in today’s world in which knowing does not consist only in memorizing information.

Whereas the focus in this approach is on the teacher, the focus in the learning paradigm is on the learner whose needs are at the centre of the attention all educators and planners who believe that meeting such needs of learners is a prerequisite for making any progress and developing any country. Nowadays, development is becoming the cynosure. The world is developing rapidly, and so is literacy. In accordance with this development, the meaning of “knowing” is being shifted, Stein(2000) contends, “from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find and use it”. Wiggins(2004), likewise, claims, in “A Learner-Centered and Participatory Approach to Teaching Community Adult ESL” that “[education] empowers,” and that “[it] allows learners to express their opinions in a more confident manner” (10). Like Stein and Wiggins, Huba and Freed(2000) both maintain that the learner-centered approach emphasizes the engagement of the learner in the educational process, and focuses on the student’s success. (153). Reiterating the preceding views, Weinmer(2002) holds that learner-centered teaching “places the emphasis on the person who is doing the learning” (p.xvi).

These arguments call for caring for learners and giving them voice so that they can express their opinions that are worth hearing. Listening to learners’ opinions is a highly significant behavior for many reasons. Firstly, it clearly shows that teachers care for learners. Secondly, it shows that teachers are keen on giving learners the voice they are denied as well as the opportunity to make remarks about the topic discussed. Thirdly, it demonstrates teachers’ willingness and readiness to help learners regain their self-confidence. Fourthly, this behavior insinuates that teachers want their students to be successful. Fifthly, the teacher’s listening to students provides the indication that he/she respects each student’s point of view. Sixthly, those teachers who act this way have a great faith in their students’ abilities. Looked at from a different perspective, learners’ voicing their opinions means that they are empowered, they are capable of doing something, they have a say in all that is happening, they are equally able to contribute to discussion and make remarks, they can learn and be better, and that they can change for the better.

Bedeviled by the futile traditional paradigm of instruction and driven by the consciousness that learners can change for the better via education, I have determined to empower my students, implementing the learner-centered approach in my classes on American literature which I have been teaching for over fifteen years running. In all these classes, I focus on the learner with the purpose of helping him/her in order to regain the self-confidence lost due to other instructors' insisting on following the teacher-centered approach they hold to be the most appropriate one for them. I create "a safe and comfortable environment, where students listen, raise questions, and make comments" (54). This environment whose climate is positive nurtures each student's productivity. It is also marked by its being, cooperative, collaborative, supportive, nonthreatening, and inviting. Such a safe environment tempts students to relax and speak, which is conducive to learning. Substantiating this argument, Hovane argues that "[t]he more relaxed the learner, the better language acquisition proceeds" (39). Combining relaxation and involvement, AL-Shalabi (2011) holds, in "Using Film to Teach American Literature," that by being "[g]iven this opportunity to voice their opinions, students relax and become as involved as I am in class discussion" (54). In addition to raising questions and making comments, I also ask my students to make presentations on the material discussed.

The value of these presentations lies in their being a chance that I urge my students to seize in order to be better. In reality, these presentations, focusing on American authors, are meant to empower learners by helping them with regaining their self-confidence. They also make them feel better. This feeling results from their realizing that they can do something, which paves the way for their becoming successful. Other scholars view these presentations the same way I do. Commenting on the value of presentations, Terry Doyle (2008) claims, in "The Learner-Centered Classroom," that the "rationale for asking students to make presentations before the whole class is that learning to speak in front of others is crucial to career success" (1). Like Doyle, Edwards (2001) contends, in "Meeting Individual Learner Needs," that the learner-centered approach, "placing learners at the heart of the learning process and meeting their needs," suggests that "... learners no longer have to learn what they already know or can do, nor what they are uninterested in" (37). Both arguments focus on the learner whose oral presentations are intended to develop his/her communicative skills which are in great demand in today's world. Arguing in support of this view, Mark Hovane (2004) claims, in "Teaching Presentation Skills for Communicative Purposes," that the purpose of presentations is "to empower students to investigate, articulate, and directly share their ideas with their teacher and peers" (47).

These presentations represent, Hovane adds, "a synthesis of different skills and knowledge areas, e.g. (vocabulary, discussion, research, note-taking, confidence building, fluency, and body language)." (37). They also further social interaction, and thus, learners can work on them together "in pairs and peer check each other [']s outlines" (41). Furthermore, presentations help learners develop critical thinking skills, and learn speech building strategies. Regarding critical thinking skills, students develop these skills as a result of making decisions about the contents of their presentations, the way they are organized, and the needs of their audience. As regards speech building strategies, these strategies help learners with finding information, evaluating it, and organizing it. They also help them with developing ideas and supporting them. It is worth noting that learners' acquiring these skills marks a step forward. It empowers them, and renders them not only more confident of themselves, but also more willing and more prepared to make their presentations. While students are doing this job, the teacher's job is to facilitate this activity, and listen to how they make their presentations. I myself facilitate my students' making their presentations, keep listening to them, praising them, and asking them not to worry at all about the mistakes made because these same mistakes lead to learning. Sometimes, I pick a glaring mistake occurring in their presentations, and make the necessary corrections without damaging their confidence.

This matter of confidence is significant. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf (1957) claims in Chapter Two that "[w]ithout self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle" (35). Woolf says a mouthful. Self-confidence is the belief in oneself and one's abilities. My American literature classes teem with learners who are shy, afraid to speak, hesitant, silent, passive, and lacking confidence. These students generally sit at the back of the classroom, and slouch low into their chairs in order to be unseen. These students do not constitute a problem for me. I know their names. I can easily ask them to respond. I keep urging them to listen, pacifying them that they are clearly seen whether they sit at the front of or at the back of the room. I boost their confidence in a variety of ways. To take an example, I ask them to make a remark, and keep urging them to do so. When they talk, I reshuffle their words and jumbled phrases turning them into a meaningful sentence. The moment I do that, they feel at ease. Another way is to give them easy-to-answer questions. Upon answering these questions, I thank them, and tell them that they are doing well. In this way, their confidence increases.

A third way is to talk about their weaknesses, express my willingness and readiness to help them with learning despite difficulties, and assure them that I do not view them in a negative light. A fourth way is to tell them that they are not alone, that I know all about their problems and weaknesses, and that it is my job to answer their questions regardless of their number, to help them resolve their problems, and to keep doing all that I can to facilitate their learning American literature. A fifth way is to ask them to contribute to discussion without being afraid of ridicule. I tell them that their views will be respected, not ridiculed. When these students respond, I keep my eyes centered on other students to stop them from mocking them. In this comfortable atmosphere, they usually respond, and, after class, they thank me for encouraging them, and making it easy for them to speak in class, which is something they have been longing for although they have been denied. These students' remarks validate my observations that I have been tenacious of throughout my life. These observations constitute the fruit of my experience that amounts, thank goodness, to forty years running.

I have been telling students repeatedly that listening by itself won't lead to their learning English, that memorizing information is not the way to learn English and speak it well, that the state of being voiceless is calamitous and not advantageous, that making mistakes is something useful not shameful, that literature is marked by subjectivity and, consequently, their views are acceptable as long as there are reasons given for their arguments, that the mastery of the grammar of English is a prerequisite for writing and speaking it well, that the absence of practice means that we'll always struggle for confidence, that voicing their opinions is central to becoming powerful and more confident of themselves, that they have abilities by means of which they can develop and learn both the language and its literature, and that they are capable of learning American literature and achieving greatness. I have realized that accentuating the positive points and ignoring the negative ones is something good that helps students maintain their confidence, and that knowing my students' names is instrumental in keeping them engaged, controlled, and attracted to all that is said in class. Speaking of the significance of names, Gil Blanchette (2002) claims that knowing students' names shows that "the teacher cares about them" (1).

In addition to knowing my students' names, I keep them engaged by resorting to other ways. I make the course relevant by connecting the topics discussed with the world they live in. I comment on certain similarities and dissimilarities, which makes realize that they are part of this world depicted in the work under discussion. I usually make the connection between the topic discussed and other appropriate historical or societal issues, or to their future goals and careers. In this way, the material becomes familiar to them, and they enjoy raising relevant questions or making comments. I also arrange for keeping them engaged and controlled by leaving the seat I sit on, walking the aisles, taking a quick look at the books and notebooks placed on the desks before them, and advising them against busying themselves with anything else other than the material at hand. If I am sitting, I can easily draw their attention by a minor variation in my voice volume or tone, a question that keeps them wondering, a long pause for an answer, a gesture, a quick look at them, etc. I may sometimes call the names of two or three students, asking them to lend me their ears. In this case, their attention will be drawn. If a student or two are not listening, I easily call their names, arguing that there is no room in my class for those who are inattentive. I may also tell them openly that they are becoming trouble-makers, and that they'll have to bear the responsibility of any punishment inflicted upon them, drop the class, and not attend next time's class before seeing me.

When these students stop by the office, I give them a piece of advice on how to be good students, how to set good examples for others, how to be successful, how to win others over by respecting them, and how to prepare themselves for their future lives. While talking to students and instructing them on what to do, I realize that my job does not consist only in dispensing information, which is something of the past, but that I'll have to do much more than that. Just as there should be a shift in the learner's role from a listener to a discoverer or a constructor of knowledge, so should there be an equal shift in the teacher's role from a dispenser of knowledge to a designer, a planner, a seeker for improvement, a guide, an assessor, etc. Defending this argument, Barr and Tagg (1995) both liken the teacher to "a coach interacting with a team" (14). They also describe him/her as being a designer of "learning environments" (14), adding that a coach instructs football players, and designs football practices as well as the game plan. Similarly, a faculty role goes "a step further ... in that faculty not only design game plans but also create new and better "games," ones that generate more and better learning" (14). Regarding roles in the new paradigm, a faculty member is expected to play multiple roles. Commenting on these roles, Barr and Tagg claim that roles begin "to blur" (14). To me, Barr and Tagg are talking sense, and their arguments are true of me. My hands are always full. When in class, I answer students' questions, and instruct them on how to read, write, and speak English well. By relating topics and works discussed, such as Frost's "The Road Not Taken," Hughes's

“Dreams Deferred,” Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Dorothy Parker’s “You were Perfectly Fine,” Michael Wallace’s “The Uses of Violence in American History,” Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” and Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” to real life situations, I give students a piece of advice on how to improve their performance, to do well, to be fluent, to live by certain values, to strike the balance between claims and deeds, to make choices, to command other people’s respect, to learn from the past, to maintain identity, to evade running into troubles, to realize dreams, to socially rise, to fight social evils, to maintain goodness, to deal with others, to choose friends, to do others justice, to combat evils, to prepare for exams, to choose a career, to achieve objectives, to study, to lead a happy life, to spend money, to please God, to choose wives, to raise children, to be dutiful sons and daughters, to treat parents, to respect teachers, to treat neighbors, to judge others objectively, to be a success, to be independent, to be reliable, to be tolerant, etc. When sitting in the office, students keep referring to me to help them with resolving their problems. Never have I sat in the office alone. It is always crowded with students. Knowing well that I am a facilitator, I do my best to facilitate students’ becoming successful, resolving their problems, and leading happy lives. I have been pleased with doing all these jobs and helping others. I am not only a “facilitator of learning”(9), as McClenney(2005) claims, but also of studying, of working, and of living happily and honorably.

It’s not easy at all to do all these jobs demanding patience, experience, wisdom, knowledge, readiness, and willingness to help others. Faculty members are different. Some of them care, but others don’t. I myself belong to the first category, and am keen on making a difference in the way I teach, treat others, especially students, sacrifice time for others, tire myself out to help others, etc. I know well that time is valuable, but as long as this time can help me with doing others good, I don’t worry about the way it is spent. Other faculty members, being unlike, limit themselves to being deliverers of knowledge, and insist on acting this way. These faculty members have not, probably, realized that the world is changing, that technological innovations are new resources which students should be capable of using, and that teaching is no longer conceived of as delivering lectures. They should realize that it’s their duty and responsibility to facilitate learning, to find ways to develop students’ talents, and empower learners so that they can be productive and successful individuals in their societies. These faculty members should not view empowering learners as being a threat. It is just a shift of focus from the teacher to the learner, and does not lessen the status of the former. While students will be busy with analysis, synthesis, and the improvement of their performance, faculty members will be responsible for other activities, such as improvement, evaluation, guidance, planning, designing new activities, and developing ways ensuring that learners achieve learning outcomes. To do these jobs thoroughly, faculty members should empower their students to be able not only to learn, but also to fit into today’s world of technological innovations where the “tabula rasa” are no longer needed.

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