

# PAULO FREIRE'S *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED*, STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING, AND POST-COLONIAL IDENTITY

## PEDAGOGIA DO OPRIMIDO DE PAULO FREIRE, APRENDIZAGEM CENTRADO NO ALUNO E IDENTIDADE PÓS COLONIAL

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### Abstract

Student-centered learning has been treated as a Western export to the rest of the world. Yet the concept has diverse meanings. Educational theorists associate it with meeting the needs of pupils and social justice orientations. On the other hand, it has been used as a jingoistic advertisement for practices which can be seen to lead to devaluation of the educational profession, and bolstering of the view of student as consumer. This essay disentangles these views and exposes some limitations of the ideal of student-centered learning. To add context, it considers the case of the United Arab Emirates, an extreme example of what can happen when students' interests are prioritized above all. Finally, the paper considers how the concept can be revised to be useful in diverse contexts.

**Keywords:** Student-centered learning. Social justice. Unites Arab Emirates. Neoliberalism.

### Resumo

A aprendizagem centrada no aluno tem sido tratada como uma transposição ocidental para o restante do mundo. Ainda assim, o conceito tem diversos significados. Teóricos da educação associam esse termo com o encontro de necessidades dos alunos e orientações de justiça social. Por outro lado, isto tem sido usado como uma propaganda pejorativa para praticas, as quais, podem levar a desvalorização do profissional da educação e reforçar a visão do aluno como cliente. Este artigo busca distinguir essas visões e expor algumas limitações concernentes à aprendizagem centrada no aluno. Para contextualizar, o artigo utiliza-se do caso dos Emirados Árabes Unidos, um forte exemplo de o que pode acontecer quando os interesses dos aprendizes são priorizados acima de tudo. Por fim, o artigo pondera como esse conceito pode ser revisitado a fim de ser útil em diferentes contextos.

**Palavras-chave:** Aprendizagem centrada no aluno. Justiça social. Emirados Árabes Unidos. Neoliberalismo.

Student-centered learning has been conceived as a Western export to the East and the developing world in the last few decades. Yet the concept of student-centered learning is less than fully developed in the literature. Philosophers of education often associate it with frameworks related to meeting the needs of individual pupils, from Deweyan experiential learning, to the “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire, 1972) and related, often dialogical social justice orientations. On the other hand, we can also see it become, in the era of teacher “accountability,” a jingoistic advertisement for a variety of practices and educational ideologies which can be seen to lead to a global devaluation of the educational profession, and the related bolstering of the view of the student as a consumer (Jackson, 2016). In this essay, I want to disentangle these different views of student-centered learning and expose some of the limitations of the contemporary ideal of student-centered learning in philosophy of education. To add some critical context, I consider the case of education in the United Arab Emirates today, which provides an extreme example of what can happen when student’s self-identified needs and interests are prioritized above all else, as in an idealized or exaggerated student-centered concept of learning (Jackson, 2015a; 2015b). Finally I will comment on how this concept could be revised or amended to be useful in diverse contexts.

## **I Come Bearing Student-Centered Learning**

At its base, student-centered learning emphasizes the student as an individual learner, whose needs and capacities should be at the forefront of educational practice. In one typical explanation, the teacher is the “guide on the side” in student-centered learning, catering to unique individual learning needs, and aiming to “meet the goals that have been made by the student and the teacher” (Overby, 2011, p. 109). A narrative often told in American education is that traditionally education there was conducted by a teacher, with students seated in theatre-style seating, so that all could face the teacher rather than their peers, as it was understood then that the teacher was the holder of knowledge, and the students were the recipients. This traditional U.S. education aimed to serve industrialization and assimilation of diverse and/or poor newcomers. In the common school, Horace Mann argued that such education be both mandatory and free of charge: a public service to society, not simply to the students (Ballantine, 1993, p. 373).

This “teacher-centered” educational perspective correlates nicely with Freire’s (1972) concept of banking education, and though it is not entirely relevant to early American history, it is often included nonetheless in education foundations class discussions on the history of education, in this context. According to the banking concept, the educator is like a banker, from which the students may

take a withdrawal, as if education was a transparent transaction of objective, abstract knowledge. In its model form, the student is conceived as knowing nothing and having no power, while the educator knows all which matters, and is all-powerful. Teacher-centeredness is therefore opposed to student-centeredness in this dichotomous treatment of tradition versus innovation, as the former is hierarchical, vertical, and/or elitist, while the latter is horizontal, egalitarian, and even possibly democratic. As Tozer, Senese and Violas (2006) write, “At the core of Mann’s effort to reform common schooling was his belief that the school must inculcate an appropriate set of moral values in the *state’s* children” (p. 65, my italics) while, on the other hand, progressive education of the early-twentieth century “rejected the traditional, classical curriculum and its methods of rote learning in favor of *child-centered curriculum* that emphasized student interests and activities” (p. 109, my italics). Thus John Dewey argued that students needed to be active to learn, and focus on skills, and that education could be a democratizing force, not simply aiding industry but benefiting society overall (e.g., 1916; Jackson, 2015b). Likewise, A.S. Neill’s Summerhill in England (1921) was designed to be free of society’s demands for social reproduction (1960).

Student-centeredness has been promoted today in diverse contexts which can be characterized by a homogenizing Western influence. Following the Bologna Process for greater educational mobility throughout Europe in 1999, the EU funded a project entitled Time for a New Paradigm in Education: Student Centered Learning (“T4SCL”) (EU/LLL, 2010). In this project student-centeredness is characterized by participatory learning, responsibility taking by both students and teachers, and consent and comprehension of learning goals by both parties (EU/LLL, 2010, p. 39). This project aimed to promote best practices which can be seen as fitting in with the concept generally. To give another example, the United States Peace Corps, which sends thousands of U.S. citizens abroad each year to build capacity in disadvantaged areas, has as one mission enabling teachers in diverse countries to use specifically student-centered techniques, from Ukraine (OSIRP, 2012) and Macedonia (PC, 2012), to Thailand and South Africa.

What is being exported today as student-centered learning by Peace Corps and the like is not opposed to indigenous teacher-centered traditions, however. Instead, teacher-centeredness can be seen to have been brought in at an early period in time by Western powers, in many cases (Jackson, 2015b). In Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, colonial and missionary schools were often among the first or earliest schools, though in some cases some version of formal schooling or traditional education may have existed previously, which became diminished in this context (Altback, 1971). The colonial schools aimed at educating typically some model minority group population (an elite or chosen tribe, mostly boys), to enable effective colonial administration. Such innovations were designed

primarily from an outsider perspective (Altbach, 1971). They are today often seen as part of an overall system of cultural domination, “as part of the process of penetration of the dominant country into the countries to be dominated,” shaping elites who identify with colonizers, and larger populations who identify with the colony, rather than with their tribe, or with “the world proletariat of which they are a part” (Masemann, 2007, p. 107). As Macaulay wrote with regard to (Asian) Indian education by the British in 1935, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions...a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (p. 430). According to Yahya (1994), it was convenient to view education as serving the local population; yet to many Victorian-era imperialists, local needs were quite trivial in the overall context (p. 40).

Even within the West modern education can hardly be seen as student-centered as a whole. The United States administrated a sort of colonial education well into the twentieth century, in the case of the assimilation of Native American children in government schools. This education was said to aid the Native American Indian toward “civilization” originally, and thus to serve both the Native American student, and the maintenance and development of a functional, productive, and peaceful society, organized by European Americans. A paradox becomes evident when one sees how methods labeled as progressive were applied in this case, however, “not as a means of strengthening Indian cultures but as motivational tools to encourage the willing acquisition of English and the acceptance of schooling and as a cure for the ever-present ‘problem’ of Indian recalcitrance and apathy” (Tozer, Senese & Violas, 2006, p. 209). Here we see educational aims crumbling apart from progressive educational practice, as these schools responded more to the interests of mainstream society than to those of the students’, even if the prescribed pedagogy was progressive education, loosely understood as a motivational technique.

Student-centered learning today has been taken up by both those viewing education as society *maintaining* and as society *changing*, by both neoliberal and social justice oriented thinkers. On the one hand the social justice educator in the Freirean tradition sees education as a dialogic act between individuals who are idealized as equal parties in the educational setting. As Freire writes, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this project, arguments based on ‘authority’ are no longer valid” (1989, p. 67). In James Banks’ latest treatment of multicultural education within international context, the individual student is similarly conceived as central: “The school should help students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively in their community culture, in the mainstream national culture, and within and between other ethnic cultures. The school should not

require students to become alienated” (2009, p. 28). Both conceptions emphasize the individual needs and empowerment of the student.

On the other hand, student-centered learning is also seen as part of the program of a more neoliberal, market-driven conception of education today. The individual student and his or her desires and interests play a role in this view, particularly with regard to pedagogy, which is understood as more effective when it caters to unique student needs. However, the role of student-centered learning, as in Native American Indian education in the early-twentieth century, often ultimately becomes in the context of international standardization and homogenization secondary to the role of other commitments in shaping practice. As Rizvi & Lingard (2010) write, “it is no longer possible to understand education policy without an appreciation of the central role that testing and accountability regimes now play in policy development and evaluation” (p. 114). Teachers may be accountable today for performing student-centered pedagogy, “producing creative, proactive individuals” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 20). This is an explicit goal in national and/or local educational policies of societies around the world today. However, the simultaneous prioritization of the production of data *demonstrating* educators’ commitments to student-centeredness has led paradoxically to a “concentration on those pupils who are close to the desired achievement levels to a neglect of others,” and the “thinning out of pedagogies” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 20).

The affirmation of student-centeredness is thus showcased in the labeling of accountability programs, and other discourse around neoliberal initiatives which seem to punish educators for students failing tests. “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) would seem to indicate that every student is attended to through the educational innovation. However, when implemented NCLB lacked attention to learning differences and learning disabilities in testing. Though it was described as a way to close achievement gaps in some places, such gaps often grew, while educational opportunities were diminished: “districts in seven states shorted their work week to four days in order to save money [...] the reverse is happening: standards are being lowered in reaction to federal mandates (Berman, Marginson, Presgon & Arnone, 2007, p. 242). Also lingering in the discourse of NCLB as well as the charter school movement in U.S. education today is the idea of the student as a consumer. Teacher authority and professionalism have been deemphasized in a context where students are supposed to be given a product (i.e., autonomy, and a student-centered education), which teachers are viewed as either succeeding or failing to produce.

In sum, many kinds of educational philosophies, interventions, and practices have been described as student-centered. Fundamental to most traditional conceptualizations of student-centered learning, such as progressive and social justice orientations of the past and present, are the needs and interests

of students as understood by teachers and students alike. However, it has also been discursively employed recently as a pedagogical strategy to increase teaching effectiveness toward goals constructed from the top down. In the latter discourse the teacher rather than the student is central, as the teacher becomes accountable for facilitating learning, while neither party is prominent in decision making about educational aims and assessments. In this context, though we can see student-centered learning discourse as a global homogenizing force in educational policy, moving from the West to the East and South, I question its effective exportation. I consider the implications of the apparent movement of student-centered learning from the West in the next section, before examining student-centered learning as a philosophy of education in its implications in an exemplary or exaggerated form, in the United Arab Emirates.

### **They Come Bearing *What*?**

Reagan (2000) contrasts Western education with various indigenous, non-Western educational traditions around the world, to arrive at a definition of Western and non-Western education from a comparative global viewpoint. Though of course one can only generalize about what is “essential” when discussing such large-scale and abstractions, Reagan argues that fundamental to distinguishing the two views is the differentiation of schooling and education. As Reagan sees it, non-Western traditions are rich in education, but not in schooling, whereas Western traditions hold education and schooling as one and the same (p. 206).

The distinction can likewise be seen as one of formal versus nonformal education (Jackson, 2015b). Formal education is defined with regard to being institutionalized, graded and “above all certificated” (Rogers, 2004, p. 77). It is standardized at a large scale and transferable across systems, enabling comparison, greater ability to count every learner, and the development of clear, possibly measurable objectives. Nonformal education has been defined on the other hand by being less or non-institutionalized. Enrolment is not required by law, as in one UNESCO definition; nor is it provided in a systematic way by the nation-state, as according to USAID (Rogers, 2004, pp. 79-80). Reagan likewise cites experiential modes of education produced by families and small community groupings, participatory mentoring, and vocational skills development which do not originate from political leadership or governing organizations.

In neither formal nor informal educational systems does the individual student need to be conceived as central to practice. Though on their face models of vocational and experiential learning common to indigenous, nonformal educational traditions seem more closely aligned with progressive and student-centered pedagogies, against the backdrop of Western liberal philosophy, Reagan



casts many of the traditions as communitarian, emphasizing community rather than individual needs. Many Western thinkers have likewise viewed formal schooling as more focused on the individual; assimilationism is, after all, a liberal scheme, aiming to provide opportunities within a relatively larger sphere beyond cultural or local traditions (Banks, 2009, p. 11). Yet schools as exports of the West, in the context of unequal power relations, colonialism, and neoliberal global education policy, are also difficult to truly view as student-centered, in either their aims or their practical implications. The formalism of education-as-schooling can be seen to lead to greater accountability that learning outcomes are met by individual learners systematically, but this hardly implies that such formalism is at the direct or sole convenience of the student, as societal interests in scaling back public expenditure or measuring international competitiveness are also factors for increasing standardization and formalization of mass schooling.

Today many postcolonial societies prioritize student-centered education in the context of both indigenous and globalizing concerns. Indigenous factors are those values and priorities which are important to a society today which are not prescribed or particularly influenced by outside forces. These may include a pluralism of values, cultures, or lifestyles; forms of sustainability; or religious flourishing. They can be seen as benefiting students individually even if they do not lead to greater economic productivity in society. As for the globalizing factors, student-centered learning is often correlated with outcomes, standardization, and accountability, as previously mentioned. The EU “T4SCL” describes this trend as an international paradigm shift in viewing education: “from the focus on teaching to a focus on learning... the most noticeable changes that can be seen are a greater emphasis on the development of skills... and the writing of course units in modules in terms of intended student learning outcomes” (Rust, quoted in EU/LLL, p. 10). Once courses are developed and implemented in terms of measurable student outcomes, one can be accountable for teaching said outcomes. These outcomes can serve students and society, by providing more objective criteria by which to evaluate educators, maintaining “accountability” in relation to cross-national and other comparative standards (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

In South Africa, for example, student-centered learning has been seen to go hand-in-hand both with outcomes-based education and the support of indigenous empowerment and knowledge in official policy documents since the end of Apartheid (Malan, 2000). In the past few years the emphasis on outcomes has been dramatically reduced and is increasingly seen as a failed policy, but initially outcomes-based education there was conceived as a way to solve problems related to teacher resistance to change since the end of Apartheid, by enforcing student-centered practices (Msila, 2007). The policy discourse

surrounding both concepts—outcomes and student centeredness—emphasizes local needs: “Outcomes-based education considers the process of learning as important as the content... The South African version of outcomes-based education is aimed at stimulating the minds of young people so that they are able to participate fully in economic and social life” (BE, 2011) thereby “ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed” (BE, 2011, p. 4). In South Africa they also changed “students” to “learners” in all government discourse in an effort to point explicitly to active learning.

South African decision making with regard to outcomes-based education and student-centered learning references as well following what has worked in the United States and Western Europe, despite the fact that educational results related to outcomes and student-centeredness are not altogether clear or positive within and across these societies (Malan, 2000; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Indeed, all over Africa it has been observed that despite the possibility that the practices associated with indigenous educational traditions could potentially also strengthen societies, “the specification of educational quality is presumed to be universal rather than nationally, culturally, or situationally specific.... Ironically, many of the strategies intended to achieve education for all in practice, render it a distant dream” (Samoff w. Carrol, 2007, p. 385). Ironically, in the case that indigenous traditions may be more student-centered than Western imports of outcomes and accounts, it would appear that the West in such cases is exporting teacher-centeredness rather than student-centeredness, as teachers can be seen in outcomes-based models as the major site of intervention, the producer of outcomes, and the body responsible for learning.

Thus, something resembling student-centered learning is becoming dominant around the world, which is viewed as an educational policy orientation exported from Western societies. However, as student-centered learning is incorporated into a broad-scale globalizing educational policy, the latter's simultaneous focus on outcomes and transferability takes us away from student-centered learning as attentiveness and responsiveness to individual students; pedagogical needs are emphasized, but students' overall needs and interests are constructed from outside. Outcomes are prescribed for students and teachers, such as learning math, for instance, or becoming educationally mobile. Yet their voices are absent from conversations about mobility and standards. Top-down policy cannot be exported for the promotion of student empowerment. Furthermore, though homogenization might be able to provide students around the world with more equal opportunities someday, non-Western traditions of education, as progressive education, can also be seen to better match the unique conditions of students around the world at present, by including student interests and needs as important factors. In sum it seems that traditions have been dismantled around the world, replaced with Western teacher-centered schools,



and then criticized from within and outside for not being student-centered in the paradoxical ways the concept is understood in global educational policy today: as pedagogy, rather than as an overall orientation. Next I question the extent to which student-centered learning, even in ideal form, is a good thing in all contexts.

### **“Never Fail a Nahayan”: Facing Students in the United Arab Emirates**

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is new to schooling. A British protectorate during most of the twentieth century, no formal schools were built there until a Kuwaiti Mission school opened in 1953 (Daleure, 2011, p. 53). Upon independence in 1971 schools were built. However, due to a lack of schooling in the culture, and a lack of suitable trained Emiratis, the school system has been staffed since primarily by expatriate workers, coming from parts of the Arab world with longer histories of schooling such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan; from the Western world, Canada, Australia, Ireland, the United States, and Britain; and from India; to work in schools, the Ministry of Education, in teacher training institutions, and higher education. “Emiratization” is now being emphasized in this context, which means in education the training of locals to work in this field, to take over their own country’s educational system with a greater degree of autonomy than has been possible in the past (Jackson, 2015b).

Of course, to be without schools is not to be without education. Like other Gulf Region countries such as Qatar (Boivin, 2011) and Oman, the UAE has traditionally taken up education as religious study, in small groups and one-on-one. Strikingly it has been observed that the tradition of Islamic education differs from the educational systems in place in the UAE today, with the former being more social constructivist in nature than the latter. Islamic education “reflected the process of using thinking during the teachings”; “Even though it was highly textual and based on memorization, it involved critical thinking and inquiry” (Hourani, Diallo & Said, 2011, p. 340-1). Reagan’s tour of Islamic education shows a focus on social construction and student centeredness:

[...] all children have the capacity to learn [...] the purpose of education is not viewed as one of “correcting” or “remediating” a sinful nature but rather one of guidance [...] like the American philosopher of education John Dewey centuries later, [Ibn Khaldun] focused on the social nature of education...[and] addressed the role of reason in the learning process [...] (Reagan, 2000, p. 191-2)

According to Hourani, Diallo, and Said (2011) there has been a change in recent history due to the development of national postcolonial identities

wherein “attitudes, opinions, and values are societal rather than individually constructed” (p. 344). This is due to Emiratis and others in the Gulf Region seeing themselves in opposition to the West, with Islamic education and western education being seen as dichotomous models. Islamic education was conducted in a homogeneous cultural context where hierarchies and cultural values were well entrenched. This is different from an Emirati classroom today, where a teacher in a men’s college might be a white Western woman in a short skirt and sleeveless blouse, and a teacher in a women’s college might be a white Western man, in a tie and blazer. Despite a tradition of student-centeredness in Islamic education, in the UAE today it is seen as an issue of liberal versus conservative education. As one observer notes, “Western trained academics working in the Gulf region have to censor their academic thrust of knowledge in order for it to fit adequately to the sensitive social, cultural and religious contexts within which they are operating” (Hourani, Diallo & Said, 2011, p. 352).

In this context, student-centered learning as a concept shaping the curriculum according to student interests and needs becomes corrupted, because the students are empowered from a material, socioeconomic viewpoint over their educators. This makes Emiratization in education quite challenging, as “One of the biggest issues is pay equity and conditions of employment; Emiratis typically demand higher pay and shorter working hours in comparison with expatriates employed in the same job” (Raven, 2010, p. 16). Today in the emirates pay for licensed teachers (particularly, inexperienced ones) is among the highest in the world. Yet Emiratis are in general unmotivated to take these jobs, due to having a higher financial status in comparison with expatriate workers, who come from relatively poor and/or depressed educational environments all over the world to teach there (Jackson, 2015a; 2015b).

Unsurprisingly in this context, material factors impact on Emirati’s motivation to study in a variety of fields and at various levels, as well. In the UAE, “nationals perceive that good jobs can be had with only a high school diploma or less,” which is a reasonable perception, indeed (Daleure, 2011, p. 62). To give a bit more context here, in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE, “citizens each have an average net worth of \$17 million” (ABC, 2007); though the society suffers from inequality, the average student’s disposable income in the Emirates is likely to be at least twice that of their teachers, who are middle-class expatriate workers, making more in the UAE than they would at home, but hardly approaching the vast wealth of the emirates. Relatedly research on student motivation there to learn English has found that “No participant responded positively to the idea of going abroad to live for work or study, and the anecdotes that they told about their travels abroad generally tended to be negative” (Fields, 2011, p. 38). Emiratis do well in the emirates without advanced education, and do not see greater opportunities globally than within Emirati

society. As Emiratization in education is largely unsuccessful, hiring quotas are sometimes dramatically applied. It is not uncommon to see in a university setting in the emirates, for example, a young Emirati (no more than 35-years old) with a local Master's degree at the level of Associate Provost, while middle-aged and nearing-retirement Westerners with doctoral degrees from well-known Western universities remain permanently at the Assistant Provost level.

The power dynamic of teacher-centered learning, where the teacher holds the power over the student, does not apply in this context as a tradition, or *de facto* educational model. However, at the same time, student centeredness is challenged there by “lack of willingness to learn interactively” among Emiratis (Raven, 2010, p. 18). To put it bluntly, you cannot center your practice on one unwilling to be centered on. Student-centeredness paradoxically demands teacher-centeredness in pedagogy in the UAE, because the students find education inconvenient, as can be found all over the globe in the short-term. (Relatedly, as I write this, the French government is considering the proposal to ban homework in public schools.) However, in the UAE, unlike elsewhere, there is no force, such as student interest or external motivation, to study rigorously. Thus, to attend to learning needs here paradoxically means to not require students to seriously learn.

At its most exaggerated form, this sort of organic and materialist-based student-centeredness of the UAE results in a teaching condition I call “Never Fail a Nahayan” (Jackson, 2015b). The Minister of Education Sheikh Nahayan is known for supporting open, collaborative learning spaces such that he will take into account any student voice or perspective, despite being quite busy as a Minister as well as the Chancellor of the three public universities in the UAE. He is not known for firing anyone students dislike. However, this does not stop educational professionals in this hierarchical society from fearing potential repercussions related to students not liking them, from him, down to much lower-level managers. As a professor there, your supervisor may like you, but he or she may fear for his/her own job security in the case you get a bad review from students under his/her supposed watch; thus, at all levels of the educational hierarchy it is emphasized to not fail students.

Indeed, student evaluations are formally a part of some faculty review processes in the UAE to a much greater extent than one would see in any Western society. This has been seen to be related both to government emphasis on educational innovation and student-centered learning, and to the goal of making UAE institutions credible in the context of the global movement of students within the region and around the globe (Aubrey & Coombe, 2011). In this context teachers are encouraged to find ways to hold students to some types of standards, without making class “too hard.” Institutional research committees might spend their time determining how instructors have cooked

their books to avoid failing students, thus catching teachers cheating for their students and for themselves. And of course, should a student have a last name like “Nahayan,” as the Minister of Education, or “Nahyan,” as the large ruling family of Abu Dhabi, educators are likely to be extra careful around them, though such discrimination is ineffective from either an outcomes-based or student-centered point of view.

The practice of “Never Fail a Nahayan” can be seen among educators in the UAE from public primary and secondary schools to tertiary institutions, and is not simply about the Minister of Education and his ilk, but rather about a culture of radical student empowerment and educator fear. As one blog devoted as a way for educators there to blow off steam has reported recently on an institution in Dubai, “the worst thing about the place is that the students know that they can complain to the head of the department and swiftly get the faculty member into trouble. The students will outrageously lie doing this, and get away with it easily” (Oasis, 2012). Testimonies like this about a number of institutions in the UAE can be easily found online, warning away potential instructors. In sum, the UAE has on the one hand “many Western teachers being brought in” to rid the nation of outdated techniques and bring in student-centered approaches (Raven, 2011, p. 18). On the other hand, the UAE has richer students than teachers, and more empowered students than teachers on a fundamental, material level; teachers actually fear the students depriving them of their livelihood. Student-centeredness has run amok.

Of course, the UAE is not the only place where teachers are beginning to fear their students—what their students can and cannot do, their motivation, or lack thereof—in the era of accountability and standards. The well-known first *Freakonomics* book (Levitt & Dubner, 2005) follows U.S. teachers who cheat tests in an apparent effort to maintain their position; in South Africa, the national tests are subject to an elaborate security apparatus, not due to *student* interest in the answers, but due to *teachers'* interests in how their own performances will be considered based on the exams at the end of the year. In these contexts power is not tied in so apparently to knowledge; if knowledge is power, students in the Emirates are definitely lacking it, though they can be quite powerful in the context of instructors who want to maintain a high income and full employment. “Never Fail a Nahayan” is an effect of the consumer society and its influence on education; but it is not in the UAE today technically of Western origin, nor of indigenous Islamic traditions. Rather “Never Fail a Nahayan” emerges in specific interrelations, not influenced by West more than East, and is a result of a different educational context than that philosophers of education are accustomed to, though it may also be a glimpse of the future, as student power over teachers and consumerist approaches to educational dilemmas increasingly shape the landscape.

Perhaps this view of power as not-knowledge should be complicated by the reconsideration of the results for Emiratis, who do not want to study abroad, who do not want professions, and so on, and seen as a result of communitarianism run amok. However, is it not student-centered in the true sense of the term, and respectful of indigenous, non-Western traditions, to not force on students outside viewpoints, instead affirming their positions, and listening to what they say matters to them (i.e., to not study too much)? Consciousness-raising could be a strategy here, as promoted by Freire (1972), to enable students to view their worlds more abstractly and within a problem-based framework. To a highly limited extent such has been found productive in the UAE in select higher education situations (Raddawai, 2011; King, 2011). Yet fundamental to the Freirean approach is that the teacher cannot already “know” the problems, or “generative themes” to base consciousness-raising around; to demand student voices to identify problems in this context resembles neocolonialist cultural pestering and ethnocentrism, as students do not express interest in learning, research, or hard work, and do not lack for much that a teacher could provide them! Thus student-centeredness in the UAE will likely continue to dominate, as “Never Fail a Nahayan” precludes the educator suggesting to students that something might be wrong with their world, their lives, and their society. Ultimately this example serves then to identify limitations of “exporting” student-centeredness, and viewing the focus on students’ self-identified interests and needs as *a priori* preferable to a teacher-centered practice.

## Summary

The student-centeredness learning concept in Western educational thought assumes a specific *a priori* context of the Western school wherein the teacher and the society’s interests are institutionalized with little thought for the interests or needs of the students as they see them. This Western school is distinct from non-Western, non-schooled traditions, wherein education is often dialogical, student-centered, participatory, vocational, and/or small-group-based. Thus, *teacher-centeredness* has truly been a Western export to the South and East. This education was developed with colonial interests in mind. A power dynamic can be observed in the relationships between teacher and student in these contexts, within and outside the West. Relatedly, it has often been held in Western thought that abstract knowledge is better than relational, personal, or individual forms of knowledge and understanding. Thus the colonial mindset is seen as a dominating force in non-Western contexts, a stripping of one’s indigenous understandings, beliefs, and values, for the convenience of administration from outside.

Thus, though student centeredness is associated in today's globalizing context with traditions of the West, the West cannot be seen as its essential origin, as many traditions can be seen to support participatory learning, social construction of knowledge, and vocational and skills-based education, outside Western contexts (Reagan, 2000). Furthermore, what has resulted from student-centeredness in the globalization of educational policy has not been unproblematic. Student-centeredness has been conflated with outcomes-based education, high-stakes testing, and accountability of educators; these latter terms move us away from students' interests and needs as understood by students.

The case of the UAE shows how student-centeredness, finally, should be understood as having outer limits to its usefulness as an educational value or priority. Student-centeredness is part of educational discourse in the UAE, and arises from an internationally-aligned framework for transferability and educational mobility. It is also an effect of a unique postcolonial sociopolitical context wherein students are empowered over educators, reversing the traditional *Western* power dynamic, and precluding the narrative of Western ideas being exported simply to South and East. When the postcolonial student has authority over the educator, it does not guarantee learning, however. Rather it can be seen to preclude learning, in a "the customer is always right" mentality wherein learning should always be fun, and never too hard, inconvenient, or time-consuming. This case complements instances elsewhere in which student-centeredness disempowers educators and delegitimizes their professionalism. We must return to, or keep the teacher a significant influencer in educational analysis and discourse, and not allow the learner's needs or interests to be bolstered or conflated with societies' such that educators are sneaking around changing grades and gaming tests to maintain their livelihoods.

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