

Learner-Led Approach to Teaching

Joel Weinberg, Meiji University, Japan

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Abstract

This paper discusses a different approach to teaching: learner-led approach in education (LED). While there are many interpretations of LED, this paper focuses on students selecting their own research topic, constructing a lesson plan and homework assignment based on that topic, and then leading their classmates in a mini-lecture/presentation about their research. The reasoning for this approach is that students will be more interested in a topic and will learn more about it when they are given the freedom to choose it themselves. Additionally, when they are required to teach what they have learned to their classmates, they will be more thorough in their research and put more thought into the lessons. This will benefit both the student who is leading the lesson, and the other classmates who will be motivated to do their best when their turn to lead the class arrives. There are a few challenges to this approach, particularly the fact that it diverges from students' and teachers' previous experience with classroom dynamics. The unambiguously positive results of this approach, however, point to the benefits of trying something different to promote better learning outcomes.

Keywords: autonomy, autonomous learning, education, learner-led

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Introduction

The goal of teaching is to help students learn, and that learning must be significant, meaningful, and involving. Anything less than that risks wasting the students' time. The traditional top-down approach where the teacher (or department, or school) determines the material to be studied, and then the lesson is led by a teacher, is not the only means of organizing a class. In fact, in some circumstances, it might not even be the best way. A different way to organize a lesson is for the students to teach and learn from each other, while the teacher stands back and monitors the process. This approach might not be appropriate for all students and all subjects, but with the right set of students who are capable to handle this style, the results can be truly impressive. When students teach to their classmates, everyone benefits. The "student-teacher" learns the subject more deeply, and all the members of the class are inspired to do their best when their turn to lead a class comes. Also, student-teachers know how to relate to their classmates and understand what will be interesting, and what vocabulary to use to explain their topic even better than when an adult from a different culture teaches them. Additionally, if the student has personally chosen what topic to teach, there will be more meaningful learning because the topic is more interesting to the student than if the teacher assigned a topic randomly. This paper is an explanation of why learner-led classes are beneficial, my experience with this type of class, what I observed the students' gained, and what challenges are involved.

The Reasons and Benefits of the Learner-Led Approach

The learner-led approach (LED) to teaching is a way to allow and encourage the students to be more involved in their learning process. LED empowers the students to learn what they are interested in, and then teach what they have learned to their classmates. The agency that this approach gives to the students is vastly different from the responsibility required in a typical classroom. Typically, teachers and schools determine what the students will learn, in spite of what actually interests the students. While a truly gifted teacher can make even a boring and difficult subject interesting, unfortunately such creative teachers are not always the norm. The reality of the status quo is that if a student is interested in a topic, that has as much to do with coincidence as to the teacher's ability to make a class interesting. However, by allowing the students to choose the topic of their research, the teacher is implicitly signaling to the students a higher degree of trust and a larger amount of expectations compared to the traditional teacher-led lessons. In the LED approach, the teacher must step back from the role he or she was trained to do, and pass the responsibility to the students to choose what they want to learn about, and to do their own research into that topic.

The LED approach is intrinsically relatable to the students because it is based on what the student is already interested in. This interest provides the inspiration to do the research and to complete the assignment. When students then teach what they have researched to their classmates, the student-teachers are potentially better able to deliver meaningful information. Student-teachers know their classmates' culture, interests, and lexical abilities better than native English-speaking teachers from a different culture and generation. The student-teacher chooses to focus on specific aspects of topics that are interesting to their own--and their classmates'--demographic. The words and ideas that are targeted in the lesson are selected based on their

relevance to the learners rather than based on a list of vocabulary words that should be learned for a specific grade or for an upcoming standardized test. The tests that are given in traditional top-down classes are based on what the teacher thinks the students should know about the subject, rather than what is organically of interest. This is why LED is a more meaningful learning approach.

LED allows teachers to see where students need more reinforcement of the material. When students are required to lead a class, they need to recall and explain in detail what they have learned about the subject. This gives the teacher a window into what the students have learned, and what they have not. It also increases students' verbal communication, public speaking, and presentation skills. LED gives the students multiple ways to remember and retain the information that they have learned. It provides an inspirational model to the other students in the class, particularly less self-confident and lexically weaker students who draw motivation from the achievements of their classmates. These weaker students realize that they, too, can lead a class. The less motivated students are implicitly reminded that their responsibility goes beyond simply attending classes, and they will need to actually demonstrate what they have learned. Finally, LED will empower the students to present what they know and give them the chance to be in charge. It will bring a sense of pride and accomplishment, especially in weaker, less-confident members of the class (Pak, 2019).

The LED approach is more in accordance with the responsibilities that await the students after they graduate. Learning how to learn about something interesting is a skill that students get from the LED approach, and will benefit them throughout their educational careers, and into their professional lives. The students who master the techniques of autonomous learning will be more independent, confident, and capable than those who are reliant on others to always teach them something new. In this way, LED is not only helping the students learn about the topics they are interested in, it is teaching them skills that are reusable in many different contexts. LED helps them to learn faster and better than the passive learning style that they have grown used to. It causes students to become proactive as it shifts the learning responsibility from the teacher to themselves. Students being taught with the LED approach cannot skirt by with a minimal effort and still achieve passable scores. The traditional teacher-fronted lesson approach where a teacher lectures to the students tacitly allows the students to passively receive information, but not to actively demonstrate what they have learned. The LED approach, on the other hand, requires students to demonstrate what they have learned by teaching it to other students. If they are not able to teach what they have learned, this is a good indication that they themselves have not yet understood their topic. This is an important signpost for both the teacher who is giving the students a grade, as it is for the students themselves to recognize that they have not yet sufficiently acquired enough understanding about their self-selected topics. These are the reasons why the LED method is a more impactful method of instruction.

The Theoretical Basis

Learner-led approaches are not a new or revolutionary concept. LEDs are consistent with Piaget's (1954) constructivist learning theory, because as students do the research for their lesson preparation, they are assimilating new information with their previous information base, and are modifying what they already know to fit with

whatever new information they are learning. The justification for the student-led class discussions can be found in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of development. Through these discussions, students are helping each other extend their learning beyond their current level. Discussion sessions can also be seen through the lens of active learning which, as Bonwell and Eison (1991) describe it, includes "instructional activities involving students doing things and thinking about what they are doing." Handelsman et al. (2007) broaden the definition of active learning by adding that, "students [should] do something--read, discuss, write--that requires higher-order thinking" that, "places some emphasis on students' explorations of their own attitudes and values." Thus, LEDs are situated in the field of constructivist learning theory, which draws on active learning strategies.

The Teacher's Role and Concerns

In spite of the benefits that the LED approach provides to students' learning outcomes, one of the challenges of this teaching style is convincing teachers to step back from their traditional role. Iversen et.al. (2015) explain that "student (or self)-directed collaborative teaching and learning is characterized by a teaching approach that aims to give students control, ownership, and accountability over their own education while the teacher acts a facilitator and resource person." Few teaching programs are preparing teachers for this type of role. Even more difficult than convincing new teachers to adopt this approach is the challenge of convincing veteran teachers, supervisors, and school administration officials that there is a better way than what they have been doing for years. The LED approach might be interpreted by the aforementioned as a dereliction of their educational duties. However, if student-directed teaching and learning is to occur, teachers and administrators alike need to be convinced that this method is well-worth teachers relinquishing control over their classes. Some teachers' concerns about this type of classroom merit consideration. For example, there is an element of unpredictability when a student leads a class discussion (Richmond, 2014). Those who are worried about this should recognize that although a student is leading the discussion, the teacher is there to act as a moderator and is sometimes required to step in to redirect a class discussion that is veering off target. Teachers are also correct to realize that because an inexperienced student is teaching the lesson, there might be important and relevant issues that are not well covered, and the other students may be getting only "half the story" (portland.edu/blog). Again, this concern can be alleviated by reminding teachers that their role is to ensure that no student misses the facts, and the teacher may need to step in for correction.

Challenges to LED

It is possible that not all students will respond positively to this new dynamic. Young learners who are insecure in their own knowledge or not confident in front of other students might be inhibited by their insecurities. Students from cultures where the teacher is highly respected for her learning might feel inadequate and ill-prepared to take on the responsibilities of teaching classmates. Some students might feel that the teacher should have the responsibility to teach, and the student should only be asked to listen and take notes of what the so-called expert teacher says. There are also legitimate concerns that some students simply prefer to passively absorb information from the teacher, rather than actively pursue the information on their own. With

respect to these concerns, teachers should be reminded that every student learns in his/her own way. Some students may prefer to be passive, but many will benefit in the long run by the LED approach.

Class Composition

My experience with this approach began when I was asked to teach the top level class in my department at Dokkyo University in Japan. The students' English ability was already high so the determination was made by the supervisors of the department that this class was not going to be a typical ESL class. The supervisors wanted this class to be taught essentially as a content course similar to a freshman English university class in the United States. I was not to focus on language learning; rather I was asked to develop a course that allowed the students to use the high level of language that they already possessed. This was a departure from the other classes in the department, and I was given the freedom to teach the class as I saw fit. The textbook that was provided for the course was consistent with the previously stated intention of the class. It was a high-level textbook that contained academic articles, and each unit was organized around a broad theme. For example, Unit 1 was about Cross-Cultural Communication, Unit 2 was about Education, etc. There were 24 students in the class, all of them were freshmen, and several had studied outside of Japan either for elementary, middle, or high school. All of the students were in the class because of their high TOEIC scores and based on their speaking fluency judged via personal interviews with the supervisors of the department. The retiring teacher who previously taught this class in my department assured me that this level was a joy to teach because the students were eager to engage with issues raised in the textbook, and eager to speak English.

Learning by Teaching

My experience teaching content-based courses has always been surprisingly educational; while teaching the course, I have simultaneously learned more about the subject as well. This led me to consider how much learning happens when we teach something to someone else. In order to teach effectively, the material must first be thoroughly understood, then clearly conveyed. If these first two conditions are met, the teaching subject can be learned by students. My supposition was that students would learn more about a topic by researching and teaching it to their classmates than if I did the work for them. This is the difference between active and passive learning. Active learning requires doing something with the information we have, whereas passive learning is simply sitting back and absorbing what someone else is saying. Active learning is more involved and therefore requires a deeper level of understanding than passive learning, where students are simply listening but not using what they are supposed to be learning.

The class was converted into an active learning environment by having the students select a topic from the textbook's theme, research the topic outside of class, develop a mini lesson including a homework assignment for their classmates, and then teach their topic to their classmates with a PowerPoint presentation. In doing so, the hope was that students would become "experts" on their topics. Students would additionally be able to relate to their peers' lessons because it was taught through a similar frame of experience and background. There's a difference between the perspectives that a middle-aged American brings to an issue, compared to that of an

18-year-old Japanese university student. The former is less relatable, while the latter is understandable, relatable, and therefore, motivational. When students see their classmates leading class discussions and giving presentations about their topics, that inspires others to do likewise.

Learner-Led Approach: First Set an Example

The first half of the semester the students learned using the assigned textbook and a familiar teacher-led, seminar format. The purpose was to demonstrate the style of engagement with the text, and with each other, that was expected of the students. Open-ended, thought-provoking questions were asked of the students, and all the students were encouraged to participate. When one or two students dominated the discussions, they were asked to hold back to give other, less talkative, students a chance to join the discussion. Nearly any contribution to the discussion was welcome, even those that were slightly off point. Another goal of these classes was to establish an open rapport where students felt comfortable voicing their opinions and were never told their interpretations of the text were wrong. Students were also encouraged to help each other gain a greater understanding of the ideas raised in the readings. The teaching point was both about the issues discussed in the textbook, as well as ideal methods of engaging with their classmates in an open, honest, and positive manner. Homework assignments consisted of reading the textbook articles and completing the follow up content and discussion questions. In class, students reviewed their answers to the homework questions in pairs, followed by a whole class discussion as a summary of the broader ideas that were brought up in the students' pair work. Students were discouraged from one- or two-word answers, and challenged to expand their ideas with more depth. This approach aimed to bring about greater clarity of thought and a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the text.

Choose a Topic Within a Theme

Beginning at the seventh-week of the semester, after demonstrating how students were expected to interact with each other, I stepped back from my usual approach. I no longer led the class discussions, and instead each student had the responsibility of standing in front of the class and instructing their classmates about an issue that appealed to them. This was the first time many of the students had ever experienced such an approach and many were understandably nervous. To prepare for this assignment, the students first had to decide what aspect of the broader theme they would like to research. They then submitted a topic proposal that I either allowed, or asked the student to refine. Most of the topics were acceptable, however if a student proposed an idea that was already chosen, or if the idea was not appropriate or consistent with the theme of the course, I gently redirected the student by making suggestions about possible topic revisions. In the first semester, the textbook's broad theme was Cross-Cultural Communication, and examples of students' topics included cultural differences such as sarcasm, personal space, apologies, and stereotypes. The second semester's theme was Education and the students chose to narrow the theme by researching home schooling, coeducational schools, public versus private education, school uniforms, gap years, and the difference between rote learning and experiential learning. All of these topics the students chose themselves based on their own interest in the issue.

Gather Information Through Research

After the students selected their topics, they had to find and submit three academic articles about the topic. At least two of these articles were required to be in English. If any of the articles were off-topic or not academic, students were instructed to replace it. The purpose was to learn as much as possible about their topics before they created a lesson. The students then chose one of their three articles and used that as the basis for their lesson. They were required to create a PowerPoint presentation of around 10 slides for their lesson which was to be roughly 25 minutes. The students first sent their PowerPoint presentations to me so that I could check them for thoroughness and accuracy. Any problems were amended before the actual presentation. In addition, the students sent their lesson's article to their classmates in advance, along with homework questions they constructed so that all their classmates could prepare for the class. The homework questions consisted of 3 vocabulary questions, 3 content questions, and 3 open-ended discussion questions. All of the homework assignments were sent to me so that I could assess what the students were learning from the materials they chose, as well as understand how the students' lessons were going to be conducted. When the students finally presented their lessons, I had already made sure that their topics were appropriate, their materials were academic, their PowerPoint presentations were on target, and their homework assignments for their classmates were thorough.

Establish Lesson Parameters and Strengthen Weak Points in Advance

All students' lessons had to follow a few guidelines. The target length was between 25 and 30 minutes, the PowerPoint presentation should have roughly 10 slides, and the slides themselves should serve as a visual aid to help explain the lesson points. Some inexperienced presenters made text-heavy slides where every word of their presentation was written. These slides were corrected before the presentations so that the presenters did not simply read the slides to the audience. Other observed problems with some PowerPoint slides were too many numbers or incomprehensible graphs. Students learned that the slides should not be confusing and instead should help the audience understand the lesson ideas. Finally, a few students needed to make changes when their presentations used cartoonish pictures which were not appropriate in an academic context.

Evaluations of Students' Lessons

The students' lessons were generally very good. The first semester's lessons were not as solid as the second semester, but this was to be expected, and also demonstrated how the students improved with experience in the second semester. Students were nervous in the first semester, but were less so in the second semester; the presentations were more complete, informative, interesting, and organized in the second semester as well. It was clear that students understood the material that they researched based on the content of their presentations and the quality of their homework questions. Most students managed to generate dialog around the issues of their lessons, and there were no major failings from anyone. Students didn't always have the correct understanding of the text to answer to a question immediately, but with some steering and guidance, students came to a more correct and fulsome understanding as a group. One area where students could improve was their

reluctance to challenge each other during their discussions. Perhaps students did not feel confident enough in their own understanding to correct their classmates' answers. There is also a cultural difference in the way Japanese students are used to interacting in a class. Whereas I prefer using the Socratic method of asking leading questions that steer the students to the lesson points, most Japanese instructors use a top-down teacher-fronted method that does not allow for much wrestling with the issues. In Japan, the teacher is the authority and the students don't question it. The classes are not intended to be open-ended discussions, rather they are teacher-centered lectures. After experiencing this type of learning environment their whole lives, this is a difficult dynamic to change in only two semesters.

Student Reflections

The last part of this assignment for the students was to write a self-assessment of their learning and performance. In an essay of 600 words, they explained what they learned through their research and reflected on the experience of teaching to their classmates. Specifically, they were asked to consider whether they felt they learned more about their topic by teaching it to their classmates, or if they felt they would have preferred to have the material lectured to them. By a nearly unanimous decision, the students believed that they learned more by doing the research themselves, creating a lesson, and presenting what they learned to their classmates. Nearly all of the students said the experience was more difficult than what they had been used to, but that they were grateful for the new learning opportunity. Quotes from 10 different students' self-reflection essays are included in the appendix.

Conclusion

The learner-led approach in education (LED) has many benefits. Firstly, it allows students to have more say in the material they want to learn about. Within the broader scope of a course's themes, there are potentially countless topics that will interest the students. Teachers do not need to limit the students to a particular topic that may not hold any interest for them. By allowing the students to choose the topics they will learn about, the material will be intrinsically meaningful and they will be less likely to become bored with their classes. Students will choose topics that are relevant to their lives and this will make learning more lasting and interesting.

The next way that LEDs help students is by giving them a chance to learn about a subject more deeply than they otherwise would if a teacher taught the material to them. By preparing a lesson about their topic, they are obliged to consider what is significant about their topics, what will be interesting, and what vocabulary and concepts are unknown to their classmates and need clarification. This forces the students to see the issues from a new angle and to break down the topics into meaningful segments that will be understood by everyone.

Another way that LEDs are useful is that students can demonstrate what they have learned through the course of their research. Active, rather than passive, learning forms deeper connections in the students' minds. By making presentations, the students are learning as they are showing what they have learned. Also, rather than taking a test, students can show their teachers what they have learned both verbally (in their presentations), and in written form (via the homework assignments they

create for their classmates and their self-assessment essays). Teachers who assess the students can use these assignments to get a more well-rounded understanding of what the students have learned, compared to one-dimensional answers on a test that is often only representative of the material the teacher has chosen to teach. Students can demonstrate that they have learned material beyond what might be expected and asked on a written exam.

LEDs also challenge students to improve their public speaking and presentation skills, which are activities that will be useful in many other academic and professional contexts. These presentations will be useful to other students in the class because they will provide a helpful, motivational model and establish a standard for other students to emulate and even improve upon. Student presentations can also help lower the affective filter of weaker students in class by demonstrating what can be achieved through effort and hard work. Rather than a teacher encouraging students to “try their best,” when classmates demonstrate such an effort, it can be more meaningful, inspiring, and helpful in overcoming any fears of public speaking. Students also have a good sense of what material will be interesting to their age group and cultural identity. Instead of a grownup from a different culture and age demographic, LEDs more accurately reflect what the students need and want to learn about. There are numerous advantages of LEDs over traditional teacher-led classes. Teachers and students alike benefit when this alternative approach is utilized.

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Contact email: weinbergjoel@meiji.ac.jp

Appendix

Student A:

“There is a lot of information which I found but did not show so I learned more about my topic compared to having a person teach the lesson to me.”

Student B:

“I was able to learn new vocabulary and re-think a lot of benefits and negative points. Furthermore, I had to provide reading and discussion questions, so I had to consider what questions I could ask from the article.”

Student C:

“I had to read many materials and understand what the author said perfectly. Thus, I was able to get new vocabulary and re-think a lot of benefits and negative points in each type of school with information on the internet and my experience. Furthermore, I had to provide a vocabulary quiz, reading questions, and discussion questions, so I had to consider what questions I could make from the article. Therefore, teaching my lesson to classmate was more beneficial for me.”

Student D:

“I was **actively involved** in the research so it was more **interesting** than attending class and doing homework.”

Student E:

“Researching what I wanted was **more enjoyable** than what someone or some textbook forced me to do.”

Student F:

“...giving a lesson is more fun than a typical class because there is no opportunity to tell something for 20 minutes, and we can learn different topics each student lesson. Although it is hard to prepare a lesson, it was beneficial for us.”

Student G:

“I felt responsibility to give a dependable lesson. If my information is wrong, that is irresponsible. I think it is important to understand contents deeply to explain and that makes presenters learn more information.”

Student H:

“If we are only taught, we can only passively study. In order to teach something to others, we need to search and investigate it much more. Searching and investigating it led us to understand it more deeply.”

Student I:

“To make a class successful, I had to do many things such as reading books, researching on the internet and hearing some experiences from friends or parents. That takes time and effort, but the more time I spent, the more familiar with the topic I became and understood deeper.”

Student J:

“Knowing the topic itself did not allow me to teach a lesson. It was also necessary to **simplify some difficult parts of the topic by paraphrasing big words so that my lesson was understandable.** I understood that teaching to learn is **very effective.**”

These 10 students are representative of what nearly every student wrote. It was satisfying and encouraging to read these opinions. Active learning requires the students to take more responsibilities and the students had never been asked to do this type of project. I was pleased to see that 22 out of 23 students recognized how beneficial the learning experience was, and these students will be more confident in English as a result.