

## APA's Learner-Centered Psychological Principles

In December of 1995, the American Psychological Association's Board of Educational Affairs circulated a draft of its *Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: A Framework for School Redesign and Reform*. (Revision prepared by a Work Group of the American Psychological Association's Board of Educational Affairs [BEA], 1995). The document was met with both praise and criticism. In fact, discussions and debate continue even as I write this paragraph. The authors of the document plan to continue revisions, but this draft is a concise statement from advocates of student-centered learning and motivation. The principles are:

**Principle 1: The nature of the learning process.** There are different types of learning—from learning habits in motor skills, to generating knowledge, to learning cognitive skills and strategies. Learning of complex subject matter in schools is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience. Successful learners are active, goal-directed, self-regulating, persistent, and assume personal responsibility for contributing to their own learning.

**Principle 2: Goals of the learning process.** The successful learner, over time and with support and guidance, can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge. To learn, students must have a goal. To construct useful knowledge and acquire learning strategies for life-long learning, students need to pursue personally relevant goals. Teachers can help students set short- and long-term goals that are both personally meaningful and educationally sound.

**Principle 3: The construction of knowledge.** The successful learner can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways. Because each student has different experiences and because the mind works to link information meaningfully, each student will organize information in a way that is unique. Teachers can help students develop shared understandings about important knowledge and skills. However, unless new knowledge becomes integrated with the learner's prior understandings, the new knowledge remains isolated and difficult to apply to new situations.

**Principle 4: Strategic thinking.** The successful learner can create and use a range of thinking and reasoning skills to achieve complex learning goals. Successful learners use strategic thinking in learning, reasoning, problem solving, and concept learning. They can use a variety of strategies and continue to expand their repertoire by reflecting on and changing their current strategies, observing others, and benefiting from instruction.

**Principle 5: Thinking about thinking.** Higher-order strategies for “thinking about thinking and learning”—for overseeing and monitoring mental operations—facilitate creative and critical thinking and the development of expertise. Successful learners can reflect on how they learn, set reasonable goals, select appropriate strategies, monitor progress toward goals, and change strategies when necessary. These abilities can be developed through instruction.

**Principle 6: Context of learning.** Learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instruction. Teachers play major interactive roles with both learners and the learning environment. Instruction must fit the students' level or prior knowledge, cognitive abilities, and ways of thinking. The nurturing qualities of the classroom environment are particularly influential in student learning.

**Principle 7: Motivational and emotional influences on learning.** The depth and breadth of information processed, and what and how much is learned and remembered, are influenced by (a) self-awareness and beliefs about personal control, competence, and ability; (b) clarity and saliency of personal values, interests, and goals; (c) personal expectations for success or failure; (d) affect, emotion, and general states of mind; and (e) the resulting motivation to learn. The inner world of beliefs, goals, and expectations can enhance or interfere with learning. Intense negative cognitions and emotions (e.g., feeling insecure, worrying about failure, being self-conscious or shy, and fearing punishment, ridicule, or stigmatizing labels) thwart complex learning.

**Principle 8: Intrinsic motivation to learn.** Intrinsic motivation, creativity, and higher-order thinking are stimulated by relevant, authentic learning tasks of optimal difficulty and novelty for each student. Students need opportunities to make choices about learning in line with their personal interests. Students are more likely to be creative and think deeply about projects that are as complex as real-world situations.

**Principle 9: Effects of motivation on effort.** Learning complex skills and knowledge requires extended effort, persistence, and practice (with guidance and feedback). Learning of complex subject matter requires considerable investments of time and energy. Unless students are motivated to learn, they are unlikely to expend the needed effort without being coerced.

**Principle 10: Developmental constraints and opportunities.** Individuals progress through stages of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development that are a function of unique genetic and environmental factors. Students learn best when materials are developmentally appropriate. Overemphasis on one kind of developmental readiness—such as reading readiness, for example—may interfere with development in other areas.

**Principle 11: Social influences on learning.** Learning is influenced by social interactions and communication with others. Learning can be enhanced when students have the opportunity to interact and collaborate with others on instructional tasks. Learning situations that allow for and respect diversity encourage flexible thinking, social competence, and moral development. Learning and self-esteem are heightened when individuals are in respected and caring relationships with others who see their potential, appreciate their unique talents, and accept them as individuals. Self-esteem and learning are mutually reinforcing.

**Principle 12: Individual differences in learning.** Individuals have different capabilities. These differences are a function of environment (what is learned and communicated in different cultures or other social groups) and heredity (what occurs naturally as a function of the genes). Through learning and social acculturation, learners have acquired preferences for how and at what pace they like to learn. But these preferences are not always useful in helping learners reach their

goals. Teachers need to help students examine their learning preferences and expand or modify them if necessary, while respecting individual differences.

**Principle 13: Learning and diversity.** Learning is most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural, and social behaviors are taken into account. Although basic principles of learning, motivation, and effective instruction may apply to all learners, language, ethnic group, race, beliefs, and socioeconomic status all can influence learning. When learners see that their individual differences in abilities, background, and cultures are valued and respected, then motivation is enhanced and learning supported.

**Principle 14: Standards and assessment.** Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing both the learner and the learning process are integral parts of successful learning. Assessment provides important information to both the learner and the teacher at all stages of the learning process. Ongoing assessment can provide feedback of progress toward goals. Standardized, performance, and self-assessments—used appropriately—can guide instructional planning, support motivation, and provide necessary corrections to guide learning.

Teaching based on these learner-centered principles would make sure that students are active in solving problems, practicing learning strategies, making choices, and discovering important ideas.