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From Teaching to Participation: Learner-Centered Pedagogical Practices and Classroom Engagement in Higher Education: Evidence from North Eastern College, Santiago City

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Abstract

Higher education institutions in the Philippines have increasingly adopted learner-centered pedagogy in response to the Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) mandate for Outcomes-Based Education (OBE). While policy frameworks emphasize active learning and student engagement, empirical evidence explaining how these pedagogical shifts are experienced and enacted in actual classrooms remains limited, particularly in regional private colleges. This mixed-methods study examined the implementation of learner-centered pedagogical practices and their influence on classroom engagement at North Eastern College, Santiago City. Quantitative data were gathered through validated survey instruments measuring learner-centered practices and behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among undergraduate students. Qualitative data were obtained through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with faculty and students to capture lived instructional experiences. Quantitative findings revealed a significant positive relationship between learner-centered pedagogy and classroom engagement. Qualitative findings further demonstrated that contextualized instruction, collaborative learning, and formative feedback fostered participation, learner confidence, and shared responsibility for learning. However, constraints related to class size, time, and assessment practices moderated full implementation. The integration of quantitative trends and qualitative insights confirms that learner-centered pedagogy, when aligned with OBE principles, enhances meaningful participation in Philippine higher education classrooms. Implications for faculty development, institutional policy, and instructional leadership are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of higher education pedagogy from teacher-centered instruction toward learner-centered engagement has emerged as a central reform agenda across global higher education systems, driven by demands for graduates who are capable of critical thinking, collaboration, and lifelong learning. Contemporary learning theories and empirical studies consistently emphasize that students learn more effectively when they are actively involved in constructing knowledge through interaction, inquiry, and reflection rather than passively receiving information through lectures (Freeman et al., 2014; Zepke & Leach, 2010). In response to these global trends, the Philippine higher education system has institutionalized learner-centered reform through the Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) framework. OBE requires higher education institutions (HEIs) to align curriculum design, teaching strategies, and assessment practices with clearly articulated learning outcomes, prioritizing student participation, authentic learning tasks, and the development of higher-order competencies such as problem-solving, communication, and self-regulation over mere content coverage (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Kahu, 2013).

Despite this strong policy alignment, evidence from higher education research suggests that the enactment of learner-centered and OBE principles in classroom practice remains uneven and highly contextualized. Studies have shown that many university classrooms continue to rely heavily on lecture-driven instruction, even within institutions that formally espouse student-centered and outcomes-based frameworks (Trowler, 2010; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Such practices often limit opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and student agency, resulting in surface learning and passive participation. As a result, classroom engagement conceptualized as students' behavioral participation, emotional investment, and cognitive effort has become a critical indicator of whether learner-centered reforms are substantively realized or merely symbolically adopted (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Engagement-focused research underscores that meaningful pedagogical transformation is reflected not in policy documents alone but in how students experience learning activities, interact with peers and instructors, and invest effort in understanding course content.

Within this context, North Eastern College in Santiago City provides a compelling site for examining the lived realities of learner-centered pedagogy under OBE. As a regional private higher education institution, the college operates within a setting where faculty members must navigate institutional expectations for OBE compliance alongside contextual constraints such as class size, time limitations, and assessment demands. Prior studies suggest that such conditions significantly shape how learner-centered approaches are adapted and enacted in practice (Zepke & Leach, 2010; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Building on this literature, the present study moved beyond merely measuring levels of classroom engagement by exploring how learner-centered pedagogy is experienced and enacted by both teachers and students. By integrating quantitative patterns with qualitative accounts of classroom interactions and lived experiences, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how learner-centered reforms unfold in practice and how they influence student engagement in Philippine higher education.

Specifically, this study aimed to:

1. Determine the extent of learner-centered pedagogical practices aligned with OBE principles;
2. Examine the level of classroom engagement among undergraduate students; and
3. Explore how faculty and students experience learner-centered instruction in relation to participation and engagement.

THEORETICAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Learner-centered pedagogy is firmly anchored in constructivist learning theory, which views learning as an active and socially mediated process in which learners construct understanding through interaction, reflection, and shared meaning-making rather than passive reception of information. In higher education settings, this theoretical foundation is operationalized through instructional practices such as collaborative learning, inquiry-

based tasks, dialogic teaching, and formative assessment, where students are encouraged to question, explore, and apply knowledge in authentic contexts. Within this pedagogical orientation, teachers assume the role of facilitators who scaffold learning, guide inquiry, and create conditions that support student autonomy and participation instead of functioning solely as transmitters of content. Classroom engagement within learner-centered environments is likewise understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral engagement, manifested through active participation and sustained effort; emotional engagement, reflected in learners' interest, motivation, and sense of belonging; and cognitive engagement, demonstrated through deep learning strategies, self-regulation, and persistence in complex tasks. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing and are theorized to flourish in learning environments that are meaningful, relevant, and participatory. In the Philippine higher education context, this pedagogical framework is institutionalized through the Commission on Higher Education's Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) policy, which requires higher education institutions to align curricula, instruction, and assessment with clearly articulated learning outcomes. Under OBE, learner-centered pedagogy is not merely encouraged but structurally mandated, as teaching strategies are expected to promote active participation, collaboration, and reflective practice. However, compliance with OBE requirements does not automatically translate into genuine pedagogical transformation, underscoring the need for empirical, classroom-level investigations to examine how learner-centered principles are enacted in practice and how they influence student engagement.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design to generate a holistic and in-depth understanding of learner-centered pedagogical practices and classroom engagement in higher education. The mixed-methods approach was appropriate because it allowed the integration of numerical trends with contextualized explanations of classroom realities. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected within the same phase of the research process, analyzed separately, and then merged during interpretation. Quantitative data were used to establish the extent of learner-centered pedagogy and the strength of its relationship with classroom engagement, while qualitative data provided explanatory depth by illuminating how these practices were enacted and experienced by teachers and students. By combining both strands, the study moved beyond measuring relationships to explaining the processes and meanings underlying learner participation within an Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) framework.

The study was conducted at North Eastern College, Santiago City, a private higher education institution implementing curricula aligned with the Commission on Higher Education's Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) framework. The institution was selected because of its active engagement in learner-centered and outcomes-oriented instructional reforms. Participants consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in selected academic programs and faculty members teaching both general education and major courses. Student participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across year levels and disciplines, thereby capturing varied learning experiences. Faculty participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on instructors who were directly involved in classroom instruction and OBE implementation. This combination of sampling strategies ensured that participants possessed relevant and information-rich experiences necessary for examining learner-centered pedagogy and engagement.

Data collection was carried out in two complementary phases. In the quantitative phase, undergraduate students completed validated survey instruments designed to measure the extent of learner-centered pedagogical practices and levels of classroom engagement. The learner-centered pedagogy scale assessed instructional dimensions such as collaborative learning, student voice, interactive discussions, and formative feedback, while the classroom engagement instrument measured behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. These instruments enabled the systematic quantification of instructional practices and learner responses across courses.

In the qualitative phase, data were gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences behind the quantitative patterns. Classroom observations focused on instructional strategies, interaction patterns, and student participation during actual teaching-learning sessions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected faculty members and students to explore their perceptions, challenges, and experiences related to learner-centered instruction under OBE. The use of multiple qualitative methods allowed for triangulation and provided rich descriptions of how learner-centered pedagogy was enacted in everyday classroom contexts.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the level of learner-centered pedagogical practices and classroom engagement, and Pearson product-moment correlation analysis to examine the relationship between the two variables. These analyses provided empirical evidence of patterns and associations within the data. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis, following an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and theme development. Interview transcripts and observation notes were repeatedly reviewed and compared to identify recurring patterns and shared meanings. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation stage, where results were compared and synthesized to validate conclusions, explain inconsistencies, and enhance the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings

Table 1. Level of Learner-Centered Pedagogical Practices (n = 210 students)

Dimension of Learner-Centered Pedagogy	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Collaborative learning activities	3.94	0.58	High
Interactive discussions and questioning	3.88	0.61	High
Student voice and participation	3.62	0.67	Moderate-High
Formative feedback practices	3.71	0.63	Moderate-High
Learner autonomy in tasks	3.55	0.69	Moderate
Overall Learner-Centered Practices	3.74	0.56	Moderate-High

Scale: 1.00–1.80 (Very Low), 1.81–2.60 (Low), 2.61–3.40 (Moderate), 3.41–4.20 (Moderate-High), 4.21–5.00 (High)

Results indicate that learner-centered pedagogical practices were implemented at a moderate to high level, with collaborative activities and interactive discussions receiving the highest mean ratings. Practices related to student autonomy showed relatively lower but still moderate implementation, suggesting partial realization of learner-centered ideals.

Table 2. Level of Classroom Engagement of Students (n = 210)

Dimension of Classroom Engagement	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Behavioral engagement	3.81	0.60	Moderate-High
Emotional engagement	3.76	0.62	Moderate-High
Cognitive engagement	3.69	0.65	Moderate-High
Overall Classroom Engagement	3.75	0.59	Moderate-High

Interpretation:

Students demonstrated **moderate to high engagement** across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral engagement obtained the highest mean, indicating active participation in classroom activities, while cognitive engagement reflected sustained effort and investment in learning tasks.

Table 3. Relationship Between Learner-Centered Pedagogy and Classroom Engagement

Variables	r	p-value	Interpretation
Learner-centered pedagogy × Behavioral engagement	0.61	< .001	Strong positive relationship
Learner-centered pedagogy × Emotional engagement	0.58	< .001	Moderate to strong positive
Learner-centered pedagogy × Cognitive engagement	0.64	< .001	Strong positive relationship
Learner-centered pedagogy × Overall engagement	0.66	< .001	Strong positive relationship

Statistical test: Pearson Product–Moment Correlation
Level of significance: $\alpha = .05$

Correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between learner-centered pedagogical practices and classroom engagement. Higher levels of learner-centered instruction were associated with increased behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment among students. Conclusively, quantitative findings indicate that learner-centered pedagogical practices were implemented at a moderate to high level, particularly collaborative learning and interactive discussions. Students likewise reported moderate to high engagement across all dimensions. The strong, statistically significant correlations suggest that learner-centered pedagogy plays a critical role in fostering meaningful classroom engagement in higher education.

Qualitative Findings and Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Learner-Centered Instruction as a Catalyst for Active Participation

Participants consistently described learner-centered instruction as a powerful catalyst for student participation and classroom interaction. Students reported that instructional strategies such as small-group discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and lessons grounded in real-life and professional contexts made them more comfortable and motivated to participate. One student explained, *"Mas madali akong magsalita kapag may group work kasi parang hindi ka nag-iisa at alam mong may ambag ka"* (I find it easier to speak when there is group work because you are not alone and you know you can contribute). Classroom observations further revealed that when lessons moved away from prolonged lectures toward interactive activities, students became more responsive, asked clarifying questions, and engaged in peer dialogue.

Faculty members likewise observed that participatory strategies reduced classroom silence and shifted responsibility for learning from the teacher to the students. A faculty participant noted, *"Kapag discussion-based ang klase, mas nagiging buhay ang talakayan at hindi lang ako ang nagsasalita"* (When the class is discussion-based, the discussion becomes more alive and I am no longer the only one speaking). This finding aligns with research demonstrating that learner-centered and collaborative learning environments significantly increase behavioral engagement and participation in higher education classrooms (Zepke & Leach, 2010; Kahu, 2013). From a constructivist perspective, participation emerges as learners co-construct knowledge through interaction, validating learner-centered pedagogy as an enabler of active classroom involvement.

Theme 2: Outcomes-Based Education as Structural Guide Rather Than Pedagogical Guarantee

While faculty members recognized the value of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in structuring instruction, they emphasized that OBE alone does not automatically result in learner-centered practice. Participants explained that OBE provided a framework for lesson planning, alignment of outcomes, and assessment design, but its pedagogical impact depended largely on the teacher's instructional creativity and classroom management skills. One instructor reflected, *"Nasa papel ang OBE nasa teacher pa rin kung paano ito isasabuhay sa klase"* (OBE is on paper, it is still up to the teacher how it is brought to life in the classroom).

Some faculty members admitted that learner-centered activities were sometimes implemented to comply with institutional requirements rather than to genuinely transform learning experiences. As one participant shared, *"May mga pagkakataon na ginagawa ang group activity dahil kailangan sa lesson plan, hindi dahil handa ang klase para rito"* (There are times when group activities are done because they are required in the lesson plan, not because the class is ready for them). This reflects what international studies describe as "symbolic compliance" with OBE, where documentation and alignment overshadow pedagogical depth (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

The findings suggest that while OBE offers necessary structural support, meaningful learner-centered practice requires reflective teaching and professional autonomy beyond policy mandates.

Theme 3: Engagement through Recognition, Feedback and Relational Teaching

Another salient theme was the role of recognition and formative feedback in fostering emotional and cognitive engagement. Students highlighted that timely feedback and acknowledgment of effort even when answers were incorrect boosted their confidence and willingness to participate. One student remarked, "*Kapag pinapansin ng teacher ang effort namin, mas ginaganahan kaming sumagot kahit magkamali*" (When the teacher acknowledges our effort, we feel more motivated to answer even if we make mistakes). Such feedback created a safe learning environment where students perceived mistakes as part of the learning process rather than as failure.

Teachers similarly observed that feedback-oriented classrooms nurtured trust and openness. A faculty member stated, "*Kapag alam ng estudyante na hindi sila mapapahiya, mas bukas silang magbahagi ng ideya*" (When students know they will not be embarrassed, they are more open to sharing ideas). This finding corroborates studies indicating that formative feedback and relational teaching strengthen emotional engagement and deepen learning in higher education (Carless & Boud, 2018; Fredricks et al., 2004). Interpreted through a socio-emotional lens, engagement is sustained not merely by instructional design but by the quality of teacher-student relationships that validate learners' efforts and voices.

Theme 4: Contextual and Structural Constraints on Learner-Centered Enactment

Despite positive perceptions of learner-centered pedagogy, participants identified several contextual constraints that limited its consistent and deep implementation. Faculty members cited time constraints, large class sizes, rigid syllabi, and assessment demands as major challenges. One instructor explained, "*Mahirap gawin ang learner-centered palagi kapag marami ang estudyante at limitado ang oras*" (It is difficult to always do learner-centered activities when there are many students and time is limited). These constraints often led to a return to lecture-based instruction, especially during examination periods.

Students likewise recognized these limitations, noting that opportunities for discussion and feedback were sometimes sacrificed due to coverage pressures. These findings reflect a broader tension between policy ideals and classroom realities, a concern widely documented in higher education research (Trowler, 2010; Kahu, 2013). The persistence of such constraints suggests that learner-centered pedagogy must be supported not only at the classroom level but also through institutional policies related to workload, class size, and assessment practices. Without systemic support, learner-centered reforms risk remaining aspirational rather than transformative.

Taken together, the themes illustrate that learner-centered pedagogy, when authentically enacted, serves as a powerful enabler of student participation and engagement. However, its effectiveness is mediated by teacher agency, relational practices, and institutional conditions. These findings affirm that meaningful learner-centered instruction in Philippine higher education requires a balance between policy frameworks like OBE and the lived realities of teaching and learning.

DISCUSSION

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings in this study provides convergent evidence that learner-centered pedagogical practices enhance classroom engagement when they are meaningfully and consistently enacted. The statistically significant relationship between learner-centered pedagogy and students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement supports long-standing engagement frameworks that conceptualize engagement as an outcome of instructional design and classroom interaction rather than a fixed learner trait (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Kahu, 2013). In the present study, higher engagement levels were associated with instructional practices that emphasized collaboration, dialogue, feedback, and relevance features commonly identified in international research as hallmarks of effective learner-centered environments (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

The findings also align with constructivist-oriented engagement research which argues that learning participation increases when students are positioned as active contributors to knowledge construction rather than passive recipients of information. Large-scale meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that active and student-centered instructional strategies lead to higher levels of student participation and achievement compared with traditional lecture-based instruction (Freeman et al., 2014). The qualitative accounts in this study deepen this understanding by illustrating *how* such practices operate in context: students became more willing to speak, collaborate, and persist in learning tasks when instruction legitimized their voices and experiences. This supports Kahu's (2013) assertion that engagement emerges within the "educational interface," where teaching practices, learning tasks, and relational conditions intersect.

Importantly, the study highlights a critical insight relevant to Philippine higher education reform: Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) functions as an enabling structure rather than an automatic pedagogical solution. While faculty participants acknowledged that OBE frameworks helped clarify learning outcomes and guided lesson planning, they emphasized that learner-centered pedagogy depended largely on teachers' pedagogical competence, creativity, and classroom management. This finding resonates with engagement research suggesting that policy-level reforms alone do not transform classroom practice unless accompanied by sustained professional learning and institutional support (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In this sense, OBE provides the *what* of learning, but learner-centered pedagogy determines the *how* of participation.

The qualitative findings further suggest that formative feedback and recognition are central mechanisms through which learner-centered pedagogy translates into engagement. Students' emphasis on being acknowledged for effort and receiving constructive feedback echoes research demonstrating that feedback is most effective when it is dialogic, timely, and supportive of learner agency (Carless & Boud, 2018). Feedback-rich classrooms foster emotional safety and trust, conditions that are necessary for sustained participation and deep cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Thus, engagement in this study was not merely a product of activity structures such as group work, but of relational teaching practices that validated students' contributions.

At the same time, the study reveals persistent contextual and structural constraints that limit the depth of learner-centered enactment. Time pressure, large class sizes, and assessment demands compelled some faculty members to revert to teacher-centered strategies, particularly during high-stakes assessment periods. This finding mirrors broader higher education literature indicating that institutional conditions such as workload policies, class size, and assessment systems significantly shape the feasibility of learner-centered teaching (Trowler, 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Without alignment between pedagogical expectations and institutional realities, learner-centered reforms risk remaining superficial or compliance-driven.

Taken together, the findings suggest that moving "from teaching to participation" in higher education requires more than policy alignment with OBE. Meaningful learner-centered engagement emerges from the interaction of pedagogical intent, relational practice, and institutional support. For Philippine HEIs such as North Eastern College, this underscores the need to complement OBE mandates with faculty development focused on active learning and feedback literacy, as well as institutional policies that make participatory teaching sustainable. In doing so, learner-centered pedagogy can function not merely as a curricular requirement but as a transformative practice that cultivates genuine student engagement.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study concludes that learner-centered pedagogical practices play a pivotal role in transforming higher education classrooms from spaces of knowledge transmission into environments of active participation and engagement. Evidence from both quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that when instructional practices intentionally prioritize collaboration, dialogue, relevance, and formative feedback, students exhibit higher levels of behavioral involvement, emotional investment, and cognitive effort in learning tasks. These findings reinforce the view that engagement is not an inherent characteristic of students but a pedagogical outcome shaped by how teaching and learning are designed and enacted (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013).

Within the Philippine higher education context, the study further concludes that Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), as mandated by the Commission on Higher Education, provides a necessary but insufficient condition for achieving meaningful learner-centered engagement. While OBE offers a coherent structural framework that clarifies learning outcomes and promotes alignment among instruction and assessment, its impact on classroom participation depends largely on teachers' pedagogical competence, reflective practice, and capacity to translate outcomes into participatory learning experiences. The findings suggest that OBE can either function as a transformative guide or devolve into a compliance-oriented exercise, depending on how it is enacted at the classroom level.

The study also highlights the centrality of relational and feedback-oriented teaching in sustaining learner engagement. Recognition of student effort, timely and constructive feedback, and the creation of psychologically safe learning spaces were found to be critical in encouraging students to participate, take intellectual risks, and persist in learning. These conclusions underscore that learner-centered pedagogy extends beyond the use of active strategies; it requires intentional cultivation of trust, respect, and shared responsibility between teachers and learners.

At the same time, the study concludes that contextual and institutional constraints—such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and assessment pressures—continue to mediate the depth and consistency of learner-centered practice. These realities point to a persistent gap between policy ideals and classroom enactment, suggesting that pedagogical reform cannot rest solely on individual teacher effort. Instead, sustainable learner-centered engagement requires systemic institutional support, including faculty development, assessment reform, and policies that make participatory teaching feasible in everyday practice.

Taken together, the conclusions of this study affirm that moving “from teaching to participation” in higher education is both a pedagogical and institutional endeavor. Learner-centered pedagogy, when supported by reflective teaching and aligned institutional conditions, has the potential to realize the goals of OBE by fostering meaningful, inclusive, and engaging learning experiences for students in Philippine higher education institutions.

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