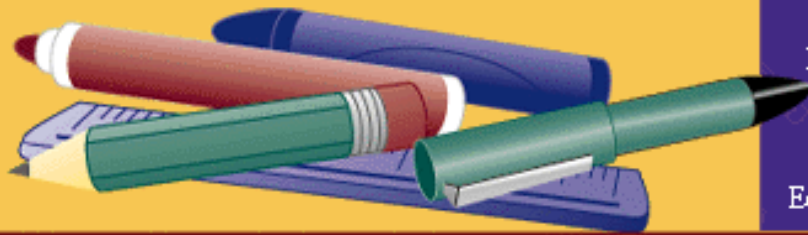


# LEARNER—CENTERED PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES: *A Framework for School Reform & Redesign*



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Prepared by the  
Learner-Centered  
Principles Work Group  
of the American  
Psychological  
Association's Board of  
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November 1997

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#### BACKGROUND

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Throughout its history, psychology has provided vital information for the design of schooling based on theory and research on human learning, development, and motivation. Research in psychology relevant to education has been particularly informative during the past decade. Advances in our understanding of thinking, memory, and cognitive and motivational processes can contribute directly to improvements in teaching, learning, and the whole enterprise of schooling. At the same time, educators concerned with the growing problems of school dropout, low levels of academic achievement, and other indicators of school failure are arguing for more learner-centered models of schooling. Such models attend to the diversity among students, and use this diversity to enrich learning and to produce results within the context of current school reform.

The learner-centered psychological principles, which are consistent with more than a century of research on teaching and learning, are widely shared and implicitly recognized in many excellent programs found in today's schools. They also integrate research and practice in various areas of psychology, including developmental, educational, experimental, social, clinical, organizational, community, and school psychology. In addition, these principles reflect conventional and scientific wisdom. They comprise not only systematically researched and evolving learner-centered principles that can lead to effective schooling but also principles that can lead to positive mental health and productivity of our nation's children, their teachers, and the systems that serve them.

Learner-centered psychological principles provide a framework for developing and incorporating the components of new designs for schooling. These principles emphasize the active and reflective nature of learning and learners. From this perspective, educational practice will be most likely to improve when the educational system is redesigned with the primary focus on the learner. Psychologists, in collaboration with educators, can help decide how best to apply sound psychological principles in the redesign of America's schools. A new and exciting vision of schooling, and psychology's role in this vision, can then emerge.

Our immediate goal in offering these learner-centered psychological principles is to provide a framework that can contribute to current educational reform and school redesign efforts. Through dialogue with concerned groups of educators, researchers, and policy makers, these learner-centered principles can evolve further to contribute not only to a new design for America's schools, but also to a society committed to lifelong learning, healthy human development, and productivity. In developing these principles, psychology -- together with other disciplines -- can contribute to the betterment of America's schools and the enhancement of the nation's vital human resources.

## LEARNER-CENTERED PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

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The following 14 psychological principles pertain to the learner and the learning process\*. They focus on psychological factors that are primarily internal to and under the control of the learner rather than conditioned habits or physiological factors. However, the principles also attempt to acknowledge external environment or contextual factors that interact with these internal factors.

The principles are intended to deal holistically with learners in the context of real-world learning situations. Thus, they are best understood as an organized set of principles; no principle should be viewed in isolation. The 14 principles are divided into those referring to cognitive and metacognitive, motivational and affective, developmental and social, and individual difference factors influencing learners and learning. Finally, the principles are intended to apply to all learners -- from children, to teachers, to administrators, to parents, and to community members involved in our educational system.

### ***Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors***

#### **1. Nature of the learning process.**

***The learning of complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience.***

There are different types of learning processes, for example, habit formation in motor learning; and learning that involves the generation of knowledge, or cognitive skills and learning strategies. Learning in schools emphasizes the use of intentional processes that students can use to construct meaning from information, experiences, and their own thoughts and beliefs. Successful learners are active, goal-directed, self-regulating, and assume personal responsibility for contributing to their own learning. The principles set forth in this document focus on this type of learning.

#### **2. Goals of the learning process.**

***The successful learner, over time and with support and instructional guidance, can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge.***

The strategic nature of learning requires students to be goal directed. To construct useful representations of knowledge and to acquire the thinking and learning strategies necessary for continued learning success across the life span, students must generate and pursue personally relevant goals. Initially, students' short-term goals and learning may be sketchy in an area, but over time their understanding can be refined by filling gaps, resolving inconsistencies, and deepening their understanding of the subject matter so that they can reach longer-term goals. Educators can assist learners in creating meaningful learning goals that are consistent with both personal and educational aspirations and interests.

#### **3. Construction of knowledge.**

***The successful learner can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways.***

Knowledge widens and deepens as students continue to build links between new information and experiences and their existing knowledge base. The nature of these links can take a variety of forms, such as adding to, modifying, or reorganizing existing knowledge or skills. How these links are made or develop may vary in different subject areas, and among students with varying talents, interests, and abilities. However, unless new knowledge becomes integrated with the learner's prior knowledge and understanding, this new knowledge remains isolated, cannot be used most effectively in new tasks, and does not transfer readily to new situations. Educators can assist learners in acquiring and integrating knowledge by a number of strategies that have been shown to be effective with learners of varying abilities, such as concept mapping and thematic organization or categorizing.

**4. Strategic thinking.**

***The successful learner can create and use a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to achieve complex learning goals.***

Successful learners use strategic thinking in their approach to learning, reasoning, problem solving, and concept learning. They understand and can use a variety of strategies to help them reach learning and performance goals, and to apply their knowledge in novel situations. They also continue to expand their repertoire of strategies by reflecting on the methods they use to see which work well for them, by receiving guided instruction and feedback, and by observing or interacting with appropriate models. Learning outcomes can be enhanced if educators assist learners in developing, applying, and assessing their strategic learning skills.

**5. Thinking about thinking.**

***Higher order strategies for selecting and monitoring mental operations facilitate creative and critical thinking.***

Successful learners can reflect on how they think and learn, set reasonable learning or performance goals, select potentially appropriate learning strategies or methods, and monitor their progress toward these goals. In addition, successful learners know what to do if a problem occurs or if they are not making sufficient or timely progress toward a goal. They can generate alternative methods to reach their goal (or reassess the appropriateness and utility of the goal). Instructional methods that focus on helping learners develop these higher order (metacognitive) strategies can enhance student learning and personal responsibility for learning.

**6. Context of learning.**

***Learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instructional practices.***

Learning does not occur in a vacuum. Teachers a major interactive role with both the learner and the learning environment. Cultural or group influences on students can impact many educationally relevant variables, such as motivation, orientation toward learning, and ways of thinking. Technologies and instructional practices must be appropriate for learners' level of prior knowledge, cognitive abilities, and their learning and thinking strategies. The classroom environment, particularly the degree to which it is nurturing or not, can also have significant impacts on student learning.

***Motivational and Affective Factors***

**7. Motivational and emotional influences on learning.**

***What and how much is learned is influenced by the motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking.***

The rich internal world of thoughts, beliefs, goals, and expectations for success or failure can enhance or interfere the learner's quality of thinking and information processing. Students' beliefs about themselves as learners and the nature of learning have a marked influence on motivation. Motivational and emotional factors also influence both the quality of thinking and information processing as well as an individual's motivation to learn. Positive emotions, such as curiosity, generally enhance motivation and facilitate learning and performance. Mild anxiety can also enhance learning and performance by focusing the learner's attention on a particular task. However, intense negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, panic, rage, insecurity) and related thoughts (e.g., worrying about competence, ruminating about failure, fearing punishment, ridicule, or stigmatizing labels) generally detract from motivation, interfere with learning, and contribute to low performance.

**8. Intrinsic motivation to learn.**

***The learner's creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control.***

Curiosity, flexible and insightful thinking, and creativity are major indicators of the learners' intrinsic motivation to learn, which is in large part a function of meeting basic needs to be competent and to exercise personal control. Intrinsic motivation is facilitated on tasks that learners perceive as interesting and personally relevant and meaningful, appropriate in complexity and difficulty to the learners' abilities, and on which they believe they can succeed. Intrinsic motivation is also facilitated on tasks that are comparable to real-world situations and meet needs for choice and control. Educators can encourage and support learners' natural curiosity and motivation to learn by attending to individual differences in learners' perceptions of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevance, and personal choice and control.

**9. Effects of motivation on effort.**

***Acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner effort and guided practice. Without learners' motivation to learn, the willingness to exert this effort is unlikely without coercion.***

Effort is another major indicator of motivation to learn. The acquisition of complex knowledge and skills demands the investment of considerable learner energy and strategic effort, along with persistence over time. Educators need to be concerned with facilitating motivation by strategies that enhance learner effort and commitment to learning and to achieving high standards of comprehension and understanding. Effective strategies include purposeful learning activities, guided by practices that enhance positive emotions and intrinsic motivation to learn, and methods that increase learners' perceptions that a task is interesting and personally relevant.

***Developmental and Social Factors***

**10. Developmental influences on learning.**

***As individuals develop, there are different opportunities and constraints for learning. Learning is most effective when differential development within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains is taken into account.***

Individuals learn best when material is appropriate to their developmental level and is presented in an enjoyable and interesting way. Because individual development varies across intellectual, social, emotional, and physical domains, achievement in different instructional domains may also vary. Overemphasis on one type of developmental readiness--such as reading readiness, for example--may preclude learners from demonstrating that they are more capable in other areas of performance. The cognitive, emotional, and social development of individual learners and how they interpret life experiences are affected by prior schooling, home, culture, and community factors. Early and continuing parental involvement in schooling, and the quality of language interactions and two-way communications between adults and children can influence these developmental areas. Awareness and understanding of developmental differences among children with and without emotional, physical, or intellectual disabilities, can facilitate the creation of optimal learning contexts.

**11. Social influences on learning.**

***Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others.***

Learning can be enhanced when the learner has an opportunity to interact and to collaborate with others on instructional tasks. Learning settings that allow for social interactions, and that respect

diversity, encourage flexible thinking and social competence. In interactive and collaborative instructional contexts, individuals have an opportunity for perspective taking and reflective thinking that may lead to higher levels of cognitive, social, and moral development, as well as self-esteem. Quality personal relationships that provide stability, trust, and caring can increase learners' sense of belonging, self-respect and self-acceptance, and provide a positive climate for learning. Family influences, positive interpersonal support and instruction in self-motivation strategies can offset factors that interfere with optimal learning such as negative beliefs about competence in a particular subject, high levels of test anxiety, negative sex role expectations, and undue pressure to perform well. Positive learning climates can also help to establish the context for healthier levels of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Such contexts help learners feel safe to share ideas, actively participate in the learning process, and create a learning community.

### ***Individual Differences Factors***

#### **12. Individual differences in learning.**

***Learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity.***

Individuals are born with and develop their own capabilities and talents. In addition, through learning and social acculturation, they have acquired their own preferences for how they like to learn and the pace at which they learn. However, these preferences are not always useful in helping learners reach their learning goals. Educators need to help students examine their learning preferences and expand or modify them, if necessary. The interaction between learner differences and curricular and environmental conditions is another key factor affecting learning outcomes. Educators need to be sensitive to individual differences, in general. They also need to attend to learner perceptions of the degree to which these differences are accepted and adapted to by varying instructional methods and materials.

#### **13. Learning and diversity.**

***Learning is most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account.***

The same basic principles of learning, motivation, and effective instruction apply to all learners. However, language, ethnicity, race, beliefs, and socioeconomic status all can influence learning. Careful attention to these factors in the instructional setting enhances the possibilities for designing and implementing appropriate learning environments. When learners perceive that their individual differences in abilities, backgrounds, cultures, and experiences are valued, respected, and accommodated in learning tasks and contexts, levels of motivation and achievement are enhanced.

#### **14. Standards and assessment.**

***Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner as well as learning progress -- including diagnostic, process, and outcome assessment -- are integral parts of the learning process.***

Assessment provides important information to both the learner and teacher at all stages of the learning process. Effective learning takes place when learners feel challenged to work towards appropriately high goals; therefore, appraisal of the learner's cognitive strengths and weaknesses, as well as current knowledge and skills, is important for the selection of instructional materials of an optimal degree of difficulty. Ongoing assessment of the learner's understanding of the curricular material can provide valuable feedback to both learners and teachers about progress toward the learning goals. Standardized assessment of learner progress and outcomes assessment provides one type of information about achievement levels both within and across individuals that can inform various types of programmatic decisions. Performance assessments

can provide other sources of information about the attainment of learning outcomes. Self-assessments of learning progress can also improve students self appraisal skills and enhance motivation and self-directed learning.

\* The development of each principle involved thorough discussions of the research supporting that principle. The multidisciplinary research expertise of the Task Force and Work Group members facilitated an examination of each principle from a number of different research perspectives.

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