

EXPLORING LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS WITHIN AN
AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE/ENGLISH
INTERPRETER TRAINING PROGRAM

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my students, who remind me every day why I do what I do.

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS WITHIN AN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE/ENGLISH INTERPRETER TRAINING PROGRAM

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The focus of this single-case study was to explore learner-centeredness for faculty members who teach in an ASL/English interpreter-training program. The results of this study highlight critical domains that distinguish learner-centered instruction from the more traditional, teacher-centered paradigm. In addition, this study identifies characteristics of Deaf culture and a visual language like American Sign Language that may foster learner-centered behaviors. Finally, this study borrows from teacher theory to help explain how faculty members may struggle with defining learner-centered teaching while excelling at describing learner-centered behaviors.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The profession of American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreting is relatively new and the academic discipline tasked with educating practitioners for this work is newer still. The preparation of faculty members for interpreter training (IT) programs can be described as emergent. The educational requirements for faculty positions in ASL/English IT programs vary across institutions. Few institutions require ASL/English IT faculty to possess a terminal degree or any training in pedagogy. The minimum qualification for applicants at some institutions is an associate's degree with a certain number of years experience in the profession and some kind of interpreter certification.

Like many academic disciplines, ASL/English IT programs recruit effective practitioners into the teaching role. So while faculty members' technical proficiency as users of ASL or as ASL/English interpreters has been vetted, they may have little if any formal preparation in education. This can be problematic, given the difficulty of mastering the ASL/English interpreting task as well as increased demands for accountability in student achievement. When combined with the demographics of today's community college students, faculty members and students in ASL/English IT programs face formidable odds.

Research suggests that learner-centered education may be an ideal approach for addressing both the increased demands in accountability and the unique challenges of the

discipline for today's community college student (King, 2000; Mino, 2004; Pillay, 2002; Reese, 1994; Thompson, Licklider, & Jungst, 2003). Because my purpose is to explore this idea from the perspective of what faculty members believe about learner-centeredness and its application in the classroom, I am reluctant to define too narrowly what learner-centeredness is as found in current literature on the subject. However, B. McCombs and Whisler (1997) have proposed a definition that is broad enough to allow for a variety of understandings of the term. Their definition states

learner-centeredness is the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners). This dual focus then informs and drives educational decision making. (p. 9)

This definition is specifically useful because of its *dual focus* looking at both what is known about individual learners as well as the latest knowledge about learning and teaching.

The next part of this chapter will help provide some background for the reader. I will establish the context for my study by providing some perspective on ASL/English interpreting and interpreter education. Then, I will address some of the factors relevant to today's community college students as well as the issue of anxiety and second language acquisition; two significant reasons to adopt a learner-centered approach for ASL/English

interpreter education. The chapter concludes with my problem statement and purpose of the study, the research questions, significance of this study, and the chapter summary.

Context for ASL/IT Education

Framing sign language interpreting.

The phenomenon of interpreting is not a new concept. Whenever individuals who do not share a common language need to communicate with each other, they may resort to using mime or gestures to make themselves understood, or attempt to express themselves in broken forms of each others' languages. Alternately, if the task of communication is delegated to an individual with knowledge of both languages, then this individual can be said to be *interpreting*. The use of an intermediary to facilitate communication has been occurring since ancient times, with interpreters being mentioned in the Bible (Simon, 1994).

Diplomatic relations between governments also contributed to the need for interpreters. Negotiations at the end of World War I and the Nuremburg Trials after World War II both depended on the use of interpreters (Frishberg, 1986; Herbert, 1952; Seleskovitch, 1978; Simon, 1994). While spoken language interpreting is not a new concept to most people, sign language interpreting is still unfamiliar to many. Interpreters who work between ASL and English belong to a profession that is widely misunderstood or altogether unknown. The professional organization for ASL/English interpreters, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Incorporated (RID) was founded in 1964 (Fant, 1990; Simon, 1994; Smith, 1964). While the last forty-some years have seen an increase in the visibility and awareness of this discipline, the field of professional ASL/English interpreting is still in its adolescence and as such is still experiencing growing pains. As

an academic discipline it is growing in popularity but as of yet, there are few options for formally preparing those who teach in ASL/English IT programs. Consequently colleges and universities recruit individuals who are content experts in the field to fill faculty positions (Thompson, et al., 2003). However, these individuals frequently lack formal training in pedagogy.

While there are a limited number of programs in the country that offer post-secondary options for sign language teachers, teaching ASL as a second language and teaching the interpreting process between ASL and English are very different disciplines. At present, higher education options specifically for ASL/English interpreter educators are extremely limited. Consequently, the primary option available to interpreter preparation programs is to identify skilled interpreters in the profession and/or native users of ASL and recruit them into the teaching role. This approach however, offers no assurance that these faculty members have any formal preparation as educators.

The demand for ASL/English interpreters has seen steady growth in this country. Legislative initiatives like the Rehabilitation Act (1973), the Individual's with Disabilities Education Act (1990), the American's with Disabilities Act (1990), and the Telecommunications Act (1996) have all led to increased demand for ASL/English interpreters. In addition, video-relay, which enables ASL users to communicate with hearing telephone users through video, represents a rapidly growing private-sector industry relying on ASL/English interpreters. According to one video-relay provider, interpreter preparation programs are unable to keep up with the increase in demand for qualified ASL/English interpreters (Sorenson Communications, 2005). Consequently, there has been an ongoing shortage of skilled ASL/English interpreters available in the

workforce to meet the needs of deaf and hearing consumers who do not share a common language.

The burden of meeting this increased demand for ASL/English interpreters falls to interpreter preparation programs across the country, a vast majority of which are located in community college settings. But, like many of the other disciplines in the realm of professional or technical education, ASL/English IT does not have a prescribed career path leading from practitioner to educator. Consequently, community colleges with interpreter training programs struggle to find and/or develop the specialized faculty needed to fill critical teaching positions.

Community college demographics.

A majority of ASL/English interpreter education in the United States occurs at the community college level. This introduces confounding variables that must be considered relative to the unique needs of community college students (Reese, 1994; Thompson, et al., 2003).

According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) (2000), 44% of all students enrolled in higher education in the fall of 1999 were enrolled at the community college level. By the year 2015, this number is expected to increase to 60%. In addition, the THECB also states that a full 50% of students in two-year institutions were under prepared for college and consequently enrolled in developmental education courses (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2005). The population of incoming students at Texas community colleges is clearly growing with increasing numbers of students needing remediation in order to succeed in college. Compounding this issue is the fact that many of these students are balancing outside responsibilities

such as jobs and families (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2002). In addition, they are also frequently the first generation of college attendees in their families, an additional factor that may inhibit student retention and success (Adelman, 1999; Astin, 1985; Malnarich, 2005; Maxwell, 1979; Robles, 1998).

Reese (1994) stated that up to 66% of students seeking higher education are considered non-traditional in terms of “age, life roles, or attendance patterns” (p. 6). These issues mean that many of today’s community college students may be ill equipped for success in the traditional teacher-centered environment typical of higher education. Yet, in spite of this information, many college faculty still teach the way they were taught, with little understanding for or application of adult learning preferences (Reese, 1994).

In light of changing demographics in the community college student population, and considering other issues faced by students who must also juggle outside demands such as work and family, community college faculty cannot afford to do business as usual. Learner-centered practices have been shown to be especially effective for the diversity typical of today’s community college student population, leading to greater student success and increased retention (Reese, 1994; Thompson, et al., 2003). Additional research suggests that a learner-centered approach is ideally suited for the non-traditional learners who make up a majority of community college student populations (King, 2000; Mino, 2004; Pillay, 2002; Reese, 1994; Thompson, et al., 2003).

Anxiety, second language acquisition, and interpreting.

The process of acquiring fluency in ASL and then developing the requisite skills to interpret between ASL and English is difficult. Students frequently experience anxiety

in acquiring a second language and in using those skills to develop interpreting proficiency (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Gregerson & Horwitz, 2002; Kemp, 1998; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Typical students of ASL/English interpreting begin their education without any prior knowledge of ASL. Those who do have some familiarity with the language are typically not balanced bilinguals. This means that most students in ASL/English IT programs must begin with acquiring a second language, ASL, before they can begin learning the interpreting process between ASL and English.

What we know from the literature on second language acquisition is that learning a second language can be a fear provoking experience. Anxiety and its effects on language learning have been a source of study since the 1970's (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001). Anxiety can impact student motivation and consequently, student outcomes. In a review of the literature on the role of anxiety in language learning, three salient perspectives exist. The first perspective looks at the concept of anxiety as a personality characteristic, something inherent in the learner (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). The second perspective considers the emotional state of anxiety in and of itself (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). The third perspective through which anxiety in language learning is viewed deals with the variety of forms of anxiety that are manifested, such as with input, processing, and output or anxiety caused by testing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Other studies on anxiety and language acquisition reference students' claims of feeling inadequate in class, especially when comparing their use of the second language to that of their classmates. Additionally, students often speak of an increase in anxiety if they misunderstand or do not understand instruction from the teacher (Gregerson & Horwitz, 2002). One study asked students to compare their anxiety levels in a variety of classes.

Consistently, language classes led to higher levels of anxiety than did other courses, including math (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989).

Considering anxiety as a single affective variable, Mougel (1998) points out its detrimental effect on student motivation, and consequently, learning in foreign language classrooms. Although specific research on anxiety in learning a visual language like ASL is limited, one author specifically addresses reasons why a visual language like ASL might be more difficult, and thus generate a greater degree of anxiety, for second language learners (Kemp, 1998). He identifies several factors that make learning ASL a difficult task. These include the attitudes that hearing students may feel about interacting with a community of users of ASL, issues related to the difference in grammar systems between ASL and English, cultural differences between the Deaf and hearing, language shock, and motivation (Kemp, 1998).

One effective way teachers can reduce anxiety in a second language classroom is to create a safe psychological environment. However, the traditional teacher-centered approach to education frequently overlooks classroom environment issues, including the psychological environment, faced by students in a second language classroom. This issue is compounded when faculty members without formal preparation as educators serve a population of community college students with unique educational needs. Learner-centered educators foster an environment that puts students at ease for optimum learning. Current research suggests that teachers engaged in learner-centered classroom practices are better equipped to address the psychological environment in order to alleviate the fears and anxieties felt by their students and improve student outcomes in the process (MacIntyre & Noels, 1996).

Problem Statement and Purpose of the Study

The problem this study addresses is that faculty members in ASL/English IT programs face enormous challenges including, the complexity involved in teaching the interpreting task, a student population with diverse needs, and an expectation of accountability for student outcomes. Research suggests that learner-centered instruction can help address these needs. So how then, do ASL/English IT program administrators and faculty members provide a learner-centered environment that can address the diverse needs of students while maintaining accountability? A clearer understanding of the beliefs about learner-centered education held by ASL/English IT faculty members can inform the process.

According to McCombs (2001), learner-centeredness occurs when specific instructional practices interact in some complex way with specific teacher qualities. The research is full of examples of instructional practices that represent learner-centered principles. These include collaboration between administrators, faculty, and staff to create a community of empowered students as learners (Atkinson, 1993; K. L. Brown, 2003; Conti, 1978; Grillos, 2007; McNeill, 2006; Reese, 1993; Stolt-Krichko, 1997), the creation of an appropriate environment for learning (K. L. Brown, 2003; Henson, 2003; B. L. McCombs, 1997; McNeill, 2006; Thompson, et al., 2003) and valuing individual differences among students (Atkinson, 1993; K. L. Brown, 2003; Dunn, 2008; McNeill, 2006; Thompson, et al., 2003).

What we do not yet know is what ASL/English interpreter educators themselves believe about the meaning of learner-centeredness, their beliefs about what led to their becoming learner-centered and how they believe learner-centered behaviors are evident

in their classrooms. In order to answer these questions, we need to know more about the learner-centered beliefs of those educators currently involved in the profession. The purpose of this study is to investigate the concept of learner-centeredness for a group of sign language interpreter educators in an exemplary ASL/English IT program at San Antonio College (SAC) in San Antonio, Texas.

Research Questions

This study explored the construct of learner-centeredness for a group of ASL/English IT educators by asking the following questions:

- 1) What do faculty members believe is the meaning of learner-centeredness?
- 2) What influences do they believe shaped their understanding of learner-centered teaching?
- 3) How do they believe they apply learner-centered practices in their classroom?

My purpose was to understand more fully their beliefs about learner-centered education as a foundation for ASL/English IT. This information would be beneficial for educators, administrators, and students. Additionally, a more complete understanding of learner-centered education for students of ASL/English interpreting could support the generation of theory in the field.

Overview of the Method of Inquiry

I conducted a qualitative study following a naturalistic inquiry paradigm using an interpretivist approach. Learner-centered theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. I employed a single-case study design. This is a logical choice since my purpose was to understand the lived experiences of faculty members in a college where a learner-centered philosophy is encouraged. I conducted a series of three informal

interviews for each of the seven participants in my study. I also analyzed data from the course syllabi and the summative evaluations for each of the courses taught by the participants in the study. Before conducting the interviews with my faculty colleagues, I chose to answer the questions in the interview guides. This served to clarify my own thoughts around learner-centered education and verified whether or not my interview guides were appropriately focused.

Significance of the Study

A better understanding of learner-centeredness from the perspective of ASL/English IT faculty members can influence practice by informing the process for other educators. An awareness of how a diverse group of faculty members successfully transitioned into their respective roles as learner-centered teachers, especially in the absence of a prescribed academic career path, benefits others facing the same challenges.

In addition, a better understanding of learner-centeredness facilitates college administrators' efforts to foster a learner-centered philosophy. Knowing what teachers need in order to become learner-centered educators will influence faculty development and streamline administrators' efforts to transform their campuses.

Also, a better understanding of learner-centered education can inform practice and theory related to the education of sign language interpreters and will ultimately lead to better outcomes for students of ASL/English interpreting. Educators will be able to use insights gained from this study to improve their course design and their approaches to teaching.

Finally, this study will contribute to theory by providing a better understanding of ASL/English IT education in a learner-centered environment. Because ASL/English IT is

still an emerging field, there is a pronounced need for further theory to guide the process of ASL/English IT. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge necessary for the generation of theory as it relates to ASL/English interpreter education.

Chapter Summary

Demand for ASL/English interpreters continues to grow with interpreter training programs struggling to keep up. A vast majority of ASL/English interpreter training programs are community college based. With no prescribed academic career path, preparation of ASL/English faculty members can vary widely. In addition, mastering the linguistic and cultural proficiency necessary to succeed as an ASL/English interpreter is a difficult task. Especially when taking in to consideration factors like the challenges typical of the community college student population, and anxiety common to second-language learners. Learner-centered education may address these issues better than the traditional teacher-centered approach found in much of post-secondary education.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the concept of learner-centeredness for a group of sign language interpreter educators. I explored their beliefs about the meaning of being learner-centered, what influences led to their becoming learner-centered educators, and how they believe they incorporated learner-centered practices in their teaching.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter examined the literature on learner-centeredness relevant to my study. I limited my review of the literature to institutions of higher education with an emphasis on community colleges. Furthermore, I focused on programs in the occupational technology or professional technical education side of community colleges. The chapter began with a general definition of what learner-centeredness is followed by a summary of the history of learner-centeredness found in the literature. Next I looked at the variety of meanings assigned to learner-centeredness along with some general characteristics of teachers who demonstrate learner-centered behaviors. This was contrasted with the characteristics associated with the more traditional faculty model found in higher education, which is teacher-centered. The ensuing section addressed reasons for considering a change to learner-centeredness and the advantages of a learner-centered philosophy. The barriers to making a transition to a learner-centered model are then examined. Finally, I explored the reality that college faculty members face as they attempt to learn their role as teachers who practice a learner-centered philosophy.

What is Learner-centeredness

In reviewing the literature on learner-centeredness there are nearly as many definitions of the concept as there are authors writing about it. In the most general terms, learner-centeredness is an alternative to the traditional teacher-driven

model of education that has characterized higher education since the early 1900's.

This viewpoint considers the typical professor as the *sage on the stage* with students being nothing more than passive recipients. In addition, the teacher-centered approach common within higher education is concerned primarily with the transmission of knowledge with the teacher being in control of the learning (Ikuta, 2008; King, 2000; Mino, 2004; Robertson, 2005; Vertin, 2001). This model is in stark contrast to the learner-centered approach where faculty members take on more of a collaborative role with their students who share in the responsibility of their own progress through the curriculum (Atkinson, 1993; D. M. Brown, 2003; Conti, 1978; Grillos, 2007; B. L. McCombs, 1997; McNeill, 2006).

History of Learner-centeredness

Learner-centeredness in higher education has an extensive history with a variety of viewpoints. According to a participant in one study, learner-centeredness is merely a passing fad that will be replaced by the latest new thing, as soon as it comes along (Egerton, 2007). However, the volume of literature related to learner-centeredness would suggest that the characterization as a passing fad is incorrect. The other end of the spectrum proposes that learner-centeredness has its roots in the teachings of Confucius and Socrates who both placed emphasis upon the learner (Harris & Cullen, 2007). In an effort to keep things on a more manageable level, for the purposes of this study I focused somewhere between the extremes of these two positions.

Without question, learner-centered education has an extensive history. Englishman John Locke was the first to introduce what he called *experiential education* or the idea that students learn through experience, an idea that has been associated with

learner-centered education (DeVito, 2008; Henson, 2003; Reese, 1993; Stolt-Krichko, 1997; Vertin, 2001). The American philosopher and educator John Dewey, another proponent of experiential learning, was instrumental in shaping the learner-centered movement in the United States and was influenced by Russian sociologist Lev Vygotsky and Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget (Henson, 2003).

Nineteenth century educator, Colonel Francis Parker is attributed with introducing learner-centered education to the United States. Parker was influenced by learner-centered education in Europe begun nearly a century earlier and travelled to Berlin to study. After returning from Europe, he opened the first Normal School in Dayton, Ohio in 1868, just after the end of the Civil War (Henson, 2003). Parker was known for giving *demonstration lessons* on the use of learner-centered techniques in the classroom such as emphasizing the student rather than the curriculum and using inquiry rather than drills or rote memorization of facts (Henson, 2003).

In the early years of our democracy, Thomas Jefferson asserted that the purpose of education was to create a responsible citizenry capable of sustaining a democratic form of government (Henson, 2003). Dewey supported this sentiment believing that developing the individual as a citizen was the pre-eminent goal of education and furthermore, learner-centered education was an effective means of achieving this goal (Henson, 2003). During the course of its history, the concept of learner-centered education has essentially been re-packaged under different labels including active learning, self-directed learning, and autonomous learning (Paris & Combs, 2006).

Several authors have offered their insight into the evolution of learner-centeredness. Throughout the literature, the terms learner-centered, learning-centered and

student-centered seem to be used interchangeably (Barrett, Bower, & Donovan, 2007; Paris & Combs, 2006; Rocks, 2004). For example, one author discusses learning-centered rather than learner-centered but the two ideas seem to be similar, with both offering an alternative to the traditional teacher-centered approach (Reese, 1993). Lending a theoretical framework to the concept, learner-centered instruction builds on both behaviorist and cognitivist theories but it is the social nature of learning that distinguishes learner-centered epistemology (Egerton, 2007). Because learner-centered instruction is collaborative in nature it is more like the theory of education as posited by Vygotsky who held that learning was a social process whereby interaction with peers as well as experts allows students to create knowledge through negotiation and discourse (Egerton, 2007).

Learner-centered education is also tied to the tenets of constructivism based on the idea that learners are allowed to make meaning for themselves using a discovery process and interacting with the environment (King, 2000). Through this process, they incorporate new knowledge with existing knowledge. Two other contributors to learner-centered theory were Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers with the focus on the student rather than on the content or the curriculum. With this model, the content is presented to individual students based on their specific needs (DeVito, 2008).

Houle (1996) introduces the concept of *learning orientation* and says that adult learners are motivated to seek out specific knowledge that helps them to obtain some goal. It is the job of educators to determine what those driving forces are that motivate adult learners and provide them with the tools and resources to achieve their goals (Houle, 1996). The belief common among adult educators regarding education and its relation to experience is also a tenet of Houle's model of adult learning, which places

greater accountability for learning with the student (Houle, 1996). Because learners are motivated by external demands to seek out the knowledge they need, these varying needs should be taken into account when teachers design learning activities for adults (Conti, 1978; B. L. McCombs, 2001). These ideals of identifying and supporting learner motivation and holding learners accountable for their learning are cornerstones of learner-centered epistemology (Dunn, 2008; Grillos, 2007; King, 2000; B. L. McCombs, 1997).

In reviewing the literature on the subject, learner-centered concepts seem to be particularly aligned with principles of adult learning. The education of adults is readily accepted as a different process than educating children. Pedagogy is considered to be more of a formational process while andragogy is more transformational (Reese, 1993). In addition, adult learners have transitioned from dependence to independence and therefore seek out education experiences for specific purposes unlike child learners (Conti, 1978). The ideas behind learner-centeredness are closely tied with the tenets of the andragogical model developed by Malcolm Knowles.

In fact, one author seems to handle the two concepts of adult education and learner-centeredness as one, tying the evolution of andragogy and learner-centeredness together (Conti, 1978). This sentiment seems to be shared by Barrett (2007) who also draws direct parallels between andragogy and learner-centeredness and Bogart (2003) who directly connects learner-centeredness to Knowles' principles of adult learning. In addition, Conti's beliefs about collaborative education have been tied to the learner-centered influences of Dewey (Reese, 1994). With so many sources of influence, it seems that learner-centeredness is somewhat of a hybrid, mixing the best of differing theories of

education. One point made very clear in the literature is that adult educators must utilize methods suitable for educating adults (Atkinson, 1993; Egerton, 2007; Harris & Cullen, 2007; Reese, 1993; Vega & Taylor, 2005).

In spite of what we now know about the difference between pedagogy and andragogy, Ikuta (2008) found that typical institutions of higher education cling to the traditional method of instructor-centered approaches common to pedagogy with the teacher at the center and students serving as receptacles to be filled. Since most faculty members at the post-secondary level are experts in their fields but not necessarily familiar with adult education, they tend to teach as they were taught, using the more traditional teacher-centered paradigm (Thompson, et al., 2003). This assertion is also made for community college faculty members who often lack a terminal degree, lack formal coursework in adult education, and work with some of the most overextended and underprepared students (Bouton, 2008). This can be especially problematic in college classes that are 'content heavy' (Thompson, et al., 2003).

Knowles expanded upon this concept of traditional teaching methods where he describes the teacher as transmitter and students as mere receivers (Bogart, 2003; Papes, 1998). This is the same concept referred to as *banking education* by Paulo Freire (2006) who instead, favored equalizing the roles of teacher and student. Freire envisioned a different form of education where the teacher and student collaborated to learn together rather than the student being passive and disengaged. This sentiment was echoed by Mino (2004) who also favored fostering a more *reciprocal process* of learning. The focus here would be for teachers and students to construct knowledge jointly instead of learning being something that happens to students. Unfortunately, this is not the way education is

perceived by many institutions of higher learning, which conduct business as usual using a teacher-centered model.

This suggests a need for change in the way institutions of higher education carry out their mission. Peter Senge, better known for his work in transforming corporations, has described colleges and universities as *controlling organizations* (Lucas, 2000). In order for these institutions to make the kinds of changes necessary for success, they need to transform themselves into *learning organizations* (Harris & Cullen, 2007). In fact, O'Banion (1997) has suggested that community colleges are ideally suited to adopting learner-centered education because they are so adept at accommodating the changing trends and evolving needs of their constituents.

In his work with California community colleges, Robles (1998) found that one essential factor in community colleges transitioning into learning organizations was the recognition that the learning needs of the organization are just as important as the learning needs of the students. This suggests the potential role that Human Resource Development departments may play in colleges becoming learning organizations. Bogart (2003) defined a learning college as one that (a) creates substantive change in individual learners (b) engages learners as full partners in the learning process with learners assuming primary responsibility for their choices (c) creates and offers as many options for learning as possible (d) assists learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities (e) defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learner (f) determines the success of learning facilitators solely on the ability to document improved and expanded learning for its learners.

Learner-centeredness is drawing from a greater awareness of how human beings learn (Harris & Cullen, 2007). The fields of neuroscience, biology, and cognitive psychology have all contributed to our understanding of learning, how people learn differently, barriers to learning, and by extension, teaching.

Meaning of Learner-centeredness

Even among proponents of learner-centered education, there seems to be confusion about what exactly captures the essence of being learner-centered. According to McNeill (2006) and Paris and Combs (2006) the term learner-centered is used to describe curriculum standards, in packaged curriculum materials, in college and university mission statements and in criticisms about current trends in education often without a clear explanation for what learner-centeredness is. In fact, the term has been so indifferently used, its elocutionary force has been weakened. McCombs and Whisler (1997) define learner-centeredness in this way:

learner-centeredness is the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners). This dual focus then informs and drives educational decision making. (p.9)

There are many other possibilities for the meaning of learner-centeredness found in the literature. So many possibilities in fact, that it can be seen as detrimental to the acceptance of learner-centeredness (Paris & Combs, 2006).

Lacking a concrete definition of what learner-centeredness means is both confusing to supporters and fodder for critics (Paris & Combs, 2006). In a study on the subject by Vertin (2001), one participant responded with uncertainty as to its meaning, but felt they could relay what they had heard about learner-centeredness or what they thought it was supposed to mean.

Another issue complicating any consensus for a clear-cut definition of learner-centeredness is one of perspective. The definition of learner-centeredness differs depending on whom you are asking. Vertin (2001) interviewed 19 employees (nine faculty members and 10 administrators) and found that college faculty members describe learner-centeredness from the perspective of instructors whereas their administrators respond from an organizational point of view citing issues about policies, procedures, and service delivery models.

One author describes what it means to be learner-centered by saying that teachers become more like facilitators of the students' learning. This is in direct contrast to the more traditional teacher-centered approach where teachers are viewed as dispensaries of knowledge (Robertson, 2005; Vertin, 2001). This concept of shifting the responsibility for learning to the student is a sentiment also echoed by Grillos (2007) and Weimer (2002) who support collaboration between teachers and students.

Another view of learner-centeredness is that it incorporates teachers' beliefs, actions, processes, philosophies, ways of doing things, and ways of making sense of the purpose of education predicated on defining successful education in terms of what the student learned (Henson, 2003). King (2000) put it more succinctly when stating that learner-centered teachers as well as institutions focus on how much and how well

students learn. Weimer (2002) goes on to say that the goals of learner-centered education include developing students who are “autonomous, intrinsically motivated, and self-regulating” (p. xx).

There have been attempts to offer research-based definitions of what it means to be learner-centered. The National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching (NCREST) has published several reports that provide definitions of learner-centeredness taken from case studies of teachers and schools that have been identified as learner-centered (Paris & Combs, 2006). In addition, the American Psychological Association (APA) in conjunction with the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) has also identified learner-centered approaches’ as those where teacher and students look collaboratively at what learning is and how it can be enhanced (Paris & Combs, 2006).

The definition of learner-centeredness proposed by McCombs (1997), in cooperation with the APA and McREL is based on fourteen learner-centered principles that are divided across the domains of cognitive/metacognitive factors, motivational and affective factors, developmental and social factors, as well as individual differences factors. These include: *Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors* 1) Nature of the learning process - where learning is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning 2) Goals of the learning process - where over time the learner can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge with support and instructional guidance 3) Construction of knowledge - where learners link existing knowledge with new information 4) Strategic thinking - where learners develop strategies for reasoning and thinking to accomplish learning goals 5) Thinking about thinking - where learners

utilize higher order strategies to foster creative and critical thinking 6) Context of learning - where environmental factors such as culture, technology and instruction influence learning *Motivational and Affective Factors* 7) Motivational and emotional influences on learning - where motivation impacts how much and what is learned and affective variables influence an individual's motivation 8) Intrinsic motivation to learn - where a learner's motivation to learn depends on their creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity 9) Effects of motivation on effort - where extended learner effort and guided practice are necessary to acquire complex knowledge and skills *Developmental and Social Factors* 10) Developmental influences on learning - where different opportunities and constraints for learning arise as individuals develop 11) Social influences on learning - where communication with others, interpersonal relations, and social interactions influence learning *Individual Differences Factors* 12) Individual differences in learning - where prior experience and heredity influence a learner's strategies, approaches and capabilities for learning 13) Learning and diversity - where taking into consideration a learners' linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds will lead to the most effective learning and 14) Standards and assessment where integral parts of the learning process include setting appropriately challenging standards and assessing both the learner and learning progress (American Psychological Association, 1997).

The Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) attempted to define learner-centered education by saying that teachers must first recognize the educational context from which students come (Grillos, 2007). Only then can teachers serve as a facilitator to help students achieve some learning objective. In this way, students are offered the skills for learning how to learn which leads to their becoming lifelong learners (Grillos, 2007;

Pillay, 2002). This continues the idea of teacher as facilitator while students take on greater responsibility for their own learning (Grillos, 2007).

So while there has been an effort to define learner-centeredness from both an empirical point of view and from the perspective of the teacher and institution, perhaps it is easier to grasp what learner-centeredness is by looking at characteristics of learner-centered teachers and institutions.

Characteristics of Learner-centeredness

Much of the literature on learner-centeredness is concerned with providing descriptions or characteristics of learner-centered faculty or institutions. Ikuta (2008) characterized learner-centered styles as engaging the learner as an active participant in the process contrasted with teacher-centered styles, which relegate the learner to a passive role. Learner-centered institutions have been described as ones where the administrators, staff, and faculty help to create a community of learners (Vertin, 2001). Additionally, learner-centered campuses should be providing a climate that serves to advance learning outcomes for students (Weimer, 2002). Emphasis should be placed on the students with high expectations for learning. The classroom focus should be on learner-centered activities (Atkinson, 1993) and the goal should be to increase the likelihood that more students will experience success (D. M. Brown, 2003).

A learning college was described by O'Banion (1997, p. 4) as an institution where:

- (a) programs and services create substantive change in individual learners;
- (b) learners are engaged as full partners in the learning process, assuming primary responsibility for their own choices;
- (c) there are as many options for learning as

possible; (d) learners are assisted in forming and participating in collaborative learning activities; (e) the role of learning facilitator is defined by the needs of the learner; (f) all college employees identify with their role in supporting learning; and (g) success is measured by documented, improved and expanded learning for learners.

Schrenko (1994) stated that learner-centered schools (a) center on thoughtful expectations and high standards, (b) focus on the success of all students with high standards established, (c) create meaningful educational experiences, and (d) allow for flexibility in scheduling so subjects can be studied in depth.

In learner-centered settings, students are allowed to create and construct their own knowledge using their own experiences and faculty members foster an environment that promotes intellectualism where students are allowed to learn (Vertin, 2001). In a study about on-line nursing education, Egerton (2007) shared ten ideals that are essential to developing web-based, learner-centered courses. These are: 1) knowledge is constructed by students, not transmitted by instructors 2) students can take full responsibility for their own learning 3) students are motivated and want to learn 4) the course provides opportunities for reflection and discourse 5) learning activities vary to accommodate different student learning styles 6) experiential, active learning augments the Web-site learning environment 7) solitary and collaborative learning activities are interspersed 8) inaccurate prior learning is identified and corrected 9) 'Spiral learning' provides for revisiting and expanding prior lessons 10) the instructor guides and mediates the overall learning process.

Henson (2003) identifies five underlying premises that drive learner-centered instruction. The first is the realization that all learners are unique individuals. An awareness of the diversity in students' background and experiences is essential in order for learning to be successful and for students to feel engaged. The second is that all learners learn differently. Instructors must recognize and validate these different learning styles, developmental stages, talents, abilities and feelings for students to learn most effectively. The third is that learning occurs best when what is being taught is relevant and meaningful to the learner. Additionally, students need to be actively engaged in constructing their own meaning by making the connection to prior learning. The fourth focuses on the necessity for a comfortable learning environment. Students need positive interpersonal relationships and to feel valued, appreciated, acknowledged, respected and validated. Finally, the fifth premise is that learning is a natural process and that students are naturally curious and interested in learning about and controlling their world.

Weimer (2002) proposes significant changes in five areas of instructional practice in order to become a learner-centered institution. These areas are; balance of power between students and faculty, function of the content, the role of the teacher, responsibility for learning, and the purpose and processes of evaluation.

Learners should also be empowered by encouraging respect from teachers, relating new content to prior experiences, valuing and assessing individual learner needs, and maintaining flexibility to foster a collaborative relationship between teacher and student (Reese, 1993). This view is also supported by Conti (1978) when he states that students should come first with curriculum, administrators, instructors and other issues coming second.

In learner-centered education, accountability for learning shifts from the teacher to the student. This involves students taking a more active role in planning their own learning objectives, (Atkinson, 1993; K. L. Brown, 2003; Conti, 1978) encourages greater participation, (Grillos, 2007; McNeill, 2006) and serves to lead students from a place of dependence to one of independence (Stolt-Krichko, 1997). In a recent study of nursing education, Heise and Himes, (2010) found that capitalizing on student-centered collaboration between students and faculty members was an effective way to improve the delivery of course content and assessment.

Instead of competing among themselves for grades like in a traditional teaching model, learner-centered instruction encourages collaboration among students (Atkinson, 1993; D. M. Brown, 2003; Grillos, 2007; Reese, 1994). This helps them to engage more of their senses as they participate in group learning (D. M. Brown, 2003). Along these same lines, D.M. Brown (2003) also suggests that learning should be active rather than passive. Students should be allowed to interact with each other as well as their environment. This enables them to construct their own knowledge. Teachers should provide these opportunities for *hands on* learning and guide students in their discovery rather than lecturing and expecting students to memorize facts about concepts (D. M. Brown, 2003).

One of the cornerstones of educating adults using learner-centered principles involves creating a safe and comfortable physical and psychological environment. K.L. Brown (2003) asserts that the culture of the classroom is as critical as is the curriculum and the teaching method. Adults must feel like they are in a supportive environment free from risk and fear in order to realize the benefits of collaborative education (Henson,

2003; B. L. McCombs, 1997; McNeill, 2006). Furthermore relationships between teacher and students are paramount (D. M. Brown, 2003). According to McNeil (2006) instructors who are able to establish positive relationships with students can facilitate learning. Rossi (2010) in a study of business students found that students' motivation levels increase when they perceive that their teachers are capable of developing positive relationships.

When planning classroom activities, teachers should focus on learner-related factors such as individual needs, pre-existing knowledge, skills, interests, social preferences, cultural diversity, and linguistic capabilities (D. M. Brown, 2003). Learner-centered educational environments can be described as those that make the most of individual differences among learners while incorporating the best available knowledge about the learning process (Thompson, et al., 2003). In addition, learner-centered education should take into consideration all of the students in the setting with a particular emphasis on the low-achieving students (K. L. Brown, 2003). Therefore, learner-centered education should be tailored to fit the specific needs of each student, even though they may not all be at the same starting point.

Another characteristic of learner-centered education is that individual differences among the students are valued and should be taken into consideration when designing learning activities. In fact, teachers who are adept at providing learner-centered instruction can benefit from the diversity in the classroom (Atkinson, 1993; D. M. Brown, 2003; Thompson, et al., 2003). When instructors adapt to specific class learning needs they are recognizing that students go through different stages of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development that are genetically and environmentally

determined. These conditions should all be taken into consideration in the learner-centered classroom (McNeill, 2006). Because students do not all learn the same way, varied learning styles need to be addressed. Teachers should do more than just appeal to auditory learners and avoid using lecture as a sole means of content delivery (D. M. Brown, 2003; Dunn, 2008; McNeill, 2006). In fact, D.M. Brown (2003) suggests that teachers should be facilitators of learning, not simply presenters of content and should lecture only sparingly.

Because students all learn differently and possess different types of intelligences they should not all be expected to do the same assignments in the same ways (D. M. Brown, 2003). For teachers in learner-centered classrooms, trying to meet the needs of all of their students, taking into account the diversity represented, can be a daunting task. Instructors face the difficulty of providing for individual social learning needs (McNeill, 2006) and for knowing individual students' capabilities so that the appropriate environment can be structured (K. L. Brown, 2003). It may mean instructors need to participate in professional development to learn how to modify their teaching methods to accommodate a variety of learners (K. L. Brown, 2003).

Another key characteristic of learner-centeredness that distinguishes it from the traditional teacher-centered approach is the concept of students and teachers sharing the responsibility for learning. Egerton (2007) describes learner-centered instruction as an approach that identifies both faculty and students as active participants in the cooperative effort of achieving defined outcomes. Not only do students share in determining the learning objectives, they are also empowered to decide how best to achieve these objectives (Reese, 1994).

This collaboration between students and teachers is fundamental in learner-centered instruction (Stolt-Krichko, 1997). Vertin (2001) and Barrett (2007) state that students participate in both determining and assessing outcomes with teachers and students held equally accountable for mastery of content. Austuto (1995) elaborates by saying that not only do teachers and students collaborate; there is greater sharing among students as they work together to accomplish learning objectives. Learner-centered instruction has also been characterized as a unique culture of collaboration where students and teachers learn together (Thompson, et al., 2003). This idea is also recognized by Reese (1993) who states that in real learner-centered instruction, the teacher stands to benefit as much as the student while allowing the learner a greater degree of control over their own learning. Daloz (1999) echoed this sentiment nicely when he pointed out that sometimes we guide our students, sometimes we walk along with them, and sometimes we follow their lead.

In summing up this sharing of responsibility between teacher and student it is plain to see that the teacher role has become one of *facilitator of learning* rather than a *dispenser of knowledge* (Reese, 1993; Vega & Taylor, 2005) with teachers checking for comprehension as students construct their own meaning (McNeill, 2006; Vertin, 2001).

Characteristics of Teacher-centeredness

After a thorough examination of the literature, there was no real definition for the teacher-centered paradigm. Rather, it was primarily handled in terms of what it consists of or what it looks like. This section will examine the core of the literature in terms of how teacher-centeredness is characterized.

The traditional teacher-centered model is commonly found in post-secondary institutions with the teacher at the center and students serving as receptacles to be filled (Ikuta, 2008). This traditional teacher-centered approach has also been identified as one where teachers are viewed as dispensaries of knowledge (Robertson, 2005; Vertin, 2001). Mino (2004) characterized the typical college classroom as one that is content driven and consists primarily of instruction through lecture, reading the textbook and formal assessment. In addition, King (2000) characterizes instruction centered teachers and institutions as primarily concerned with the content they deliver. Their number one goal is the dissemination of information.

Furthermore, successful teaching is gauged not in terms of student outcomes, but whether or not the teacher was successful in presenting the material (King, 2000). The primary methodology for instruction is lecture where the main purpose is for the instructor to transmit knowledge (Barrett, et al., 2007; Bouton, 2008). In a study by Atkinson (1993) teacher-centered instructors were not viewed as facilitators engaged in a collaborative effort with students, rather they were more *providers of knowledge*.

Bouton (2008) reports results from the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement stating that lecture is still the primary method of instruction in community colleges. A study by K.L. Brown (2003) confirmed the concept of teacher-centered instruction as being primarily lecture driven. This method of instruction reduces the requirement for student participation so much so that for some faculty members, participation is only considered if a student's grade is borderline (Grillos, 2007). Bouton (2008) further posits that lecture is inherently teacher-centered because it forces the

students into a primarily passive role. Reese (1993) and Ikuta (2008) also believe that lecture, as a method of instruction, leads to students taking on a more passive role.

With lecture as the primary means of instruction, it stands to reason that teacher-centered classrooms would also be less custom-fitted to the individual needs of the students. This is supported by the findings of several researchers. Reese (1993) found that instructors in teacher-centered classrooms determine the learning objectives and focus on changing student behavior placing students in a passive role. Atkinson (1993) also documented that teacher-centered instructors tend to ignore the individual needs of students and instead more often rely on a 'one size fits all' approach using canned lecture materials with little regard for variety of learning styles. While this method predominates the teaching found in higher education today (Hewett, 2003), K.L. Brown (2003) asserts that it is not effective for many of today's students who represent a diverse group.

The locus of control in teacher-centered classrooms lies with the teacher who is the main agent of authority (Barrett, et al., 2007). Atkinson (1993) found that the instructor in teacher-centered classrooms determines learning objectives with no input from students. In addition, there was no importance placed on prior student learning. This means that the individual needs of students are not taken into consideration in teacher-centered classrooms. In her 2002 book *Learner-Centered Teaching*, Maryellen Weimer describes her own reflective journey away from teacher-centeredness by saying,

It was as if someone had held a mirror up to my teaching. In that reflection, I saw a different, and not very flattering, instructional image: an authoritarian, controlling teacher who directed the action, often totally unaware of and blissfully oblivious to the impact of those policies, practices, and behaviors on student

learning and motivation. Displays of instructor power were present everywhere. I came to realize that the classroom environment I created ended up being a place where *I* could succeed and do well. Student learning just happened, an assumed outcome of instructional action that featured me. (Weimer, 2002, p. 3)

Reese (1993) and K.L. Brown (2003) both found that teachers determine the learning objectives and method of instruction. Students are subjugated to a secondary role where they have little input and are mostly passive receivers of instruction. Assessment in teacher-centered classrooms is usually more formal testing rather than informal evaluation and standardized testing is common (Atkinson, 1993).

The relationship between teacher and students is also prescribed in teacher-centered classrooms. K.L. Brown (2003) found that any effort to get to know the student on a personal level or even how they preferred to learn was only of secondary importance. The author writes that most interaction between teacher and students results from direct questions from the teacher, allowing them to maintain control. Anton (1999) also found that in the teacher-centered classroom, interaction between the students and the teacher is generally limited and typically dictated by the teacher. Finally, Weimer (2002) says that power structures that sustain the role of the one wielding power only serve to limit and interfere with learning.

This system of teacher-centered instruction is naturally self-perpetuating because many faculty members at the post-secondary level may be experts in their fields but not in andragogy. Therefore, they tend to teach as they were taught, using the more traditional, teacher-centered paradigm. This is especially true in college classes that are content heavy (Reese, 1994; Thompson, et al., 2003).

Reasons to Consider a Change to Learner-centeredness

The 1957 launching of Sputnik by the Soviet Union is cited by some as the impetus for serious education reform in this country (DeVito, 2008). The contemporary sentiment in the United States was that we were lagging behind the Soviet Union in terms of achievement in math and science. Regardless of whether or not this was based in fact or merely a perception, it led to a concerted effort at educational reform in this country with learner-centeredness as a cornerstone. The immense body of literature centering on American school reform places learner-centeredness in a significant role. Much of this reform effort has occurred in vocational education within community colleges.

When vocational education was implemented in this country it was considered separate and distinctly different from *academic* higher education (Dare, 2001). Its purpose was to educate a workforce that could continue to supply the machinery of the industrial age (Ikuta, 2008). However, much has changed in the last five or six decades. Now, there is less distinction between academic and vocational education and community college students are driving a re-examination of service delivery in higher education (Dare, 2001). Originally, students could function well in their post-education careers with low level skills as identified by Bloom; including knowledge, comprehension and application (Ikuta, 2008). However, today's graduates need to be able to function across the entire range of Bloom's taxonomy of skills to include analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In addition, the change in the student demographics requires education to adapt accordingly. Once the domain of wealthy, young, white males, the school environment of today is much more diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and prior educational preparation (Dare, 2001). Additional pressure to adapt

comes from the impact of the information age and our global economy. The demands of a knowledge based, global economy will require fundamental changes in how colleges and universities prepare students for employment (Osborne, 2008; Reese, 1994).

A study by King (2000) suggests that we need to improve college teaching. Helping teachers to identify and rectify inappropriate paradigms can serve to accomplish this goal. One possible solution is to incorporate learner-centered education strategies in order to improve student outcomes (King, 2000). Some of the *drivers of change* are internal while others are external. The internal forces leading to change include faculty members and administrators who simply realize that there must be a better way. Reese (1994) stated that competition among institutions to attract and retain students is forcing new innovations in educational practices, driving colleges and universities towards better teaching.

There are numerous external forces suggesting a change is in order as well. These include employers who hire college and university graduates (King, 2000; Reese, 1994), legislative bodies who provide the funding for public colleges and universities (King, 2000), accrediting and regulatory bodies (King, 2000; Reese, 1994), as well as researchers and theorists who are proposing change based on new knowledge about teaching and learning (Harris & Cullen, 2007; King, 2000; Reese, 1993). In a study conducted by Pillay (2002) faculty and administrators working in the educational setting adapted to changes happening in various sectors of society. External forces felt by these institutions predicated some of these changes. Reese (1994) found that colleges and universities adopted innovative changes to their service delivery because of a shift in

student demographics, shrinking financial support by legislative bodies, and increased accountability from accrediting agencies.

Along these same lines, the National Science Foundation recommends changing the focus of education from memorizing facts to mastering concepts. In a study of undergraduate biology instruction, McCormick (McCormick, 2000) applied learner-centered practices in order to increase students' ability to think critically and use reasoning skills to solve problems. Using an activity-based curriculum, students were encouraged to incorporate technology and the scientific process to demonstrate concept mastery. Other reasons for adopting new methods of instruction include legislative requirements, student diversity, the incorporation of technology, and issues of school violence (K. L. Brown, 2003). In a study by Harris (2007) greater demands of accountability and the need to do more with less was motivation for a change from doing business as usual for colleges and universities. King (2000) also supports the idea of greater accountability from accrediting agencies as driving changes in college teaching. King goes on to say that the expectation that colleges will routinely examine their teaching critically in an ongoing effort for improvement is just an accepted part of an institution's life.

Advances in our understanding about teaching and learning are also serving to drive educational improvements. Many of the traditional ways of educating students are actually counter-productive. King (2000) states that instead of being brain compatible, much of what was done in the way of education previously is actually brain-antagonistic. Advances in the neuroscience field have led us to a better understanding of how the brain works and by extension, how teaching and learning should occur. In addition to the

contributions from neuroscience, the fields of biology and cognitive psychology have offered similar information. We now know more than ever about how individuals learn, the barriers to learning, and the variety of learning strategies students may employ (Harris & Cullen, 2007). By capitalizing on this new information, colleges and universities can benefit by adopting methodologies compatible with the current research on adult education. This will serve to attract and retain adult learners (Reese, 1993).

The bulk of the research addressing reasons for considering a different approach to higher education addressed the changing demographic of the student population (King, 2000; Mino, 2004; Pillay, 2002). According to Reese (1994) a full 66% of today's learners in higher education would be classified as non-traditional indicating an entirely different approach may be in order. Recent findings suggest that for the current student demographic, traditional teacher-centered education may not be effective. Shifting to a more learner-centered model incorporating elements of adult education and alternative strategies may be necessary (K. L. Brown, 2003; Reese, 1993). In addition, McCombs (1997) says that higher education must address the specific needs of a more diverse student population. Reese (1994) goes so far as to say that learners may continue to struggle until faculty members adopt a more learner-centered epistemology.

In a study of nursing programs, Papes (1998) found that the traditional college student no longer exists. Instead, students today face a completely unique set of challenges. These may include a change in career path, entering school at a later age for financial considerations, and being a single, head-of-household parent (Papes, 1998). Educators working in colleges and universities need to be aware of the characteristics of these non-traditional students. These may include; (a) roles outside of college life, (b)

established self-concept and professional image, and (c) individual goals and expectations (Reese, 1993).

This growing diversity in the student population also suggests that students coming into our classrooms will bring with them a more varied educational background. Teachers need to adapt accordingly to accommodate students who may not all start at the same level or progress at the same rates (Dare, 2001; Grillos, 2007). In addition, community college faculty members face even greater challenges. Strategies that have previously been successful may no longer be applicable (King, 2000). Reese (1994) argues for learner-centeredness as the best approach for meeting the needs of the diverse population of learners in today's college classrooms.

Inarguably, changes in society have led to an increasing number of mature-age students enrolling in colleges and universities. Often, these students are pursuing an upgrade in their academic skills or qualifications or are enhancing their work skills for better employment (Pillay, 2002). These learners are distinctly different from students who enter college directly out of high school. In addition, Stolt-Krichko (1997) differentiates the typical community college student from the student enrolled in a university; suggesting that a more learner-centered approach may be of benefit. Another study found that up to 50% of today's community college students are in need of some kind of academic remediation on top of managing conflicting roles of student, breadwinner, or single parent (Bouton, 2008).

Clearly, times are changing. With increased accountability from accrediting and funding agencies, shrinking financial resources, more awareness of the specific needs of adult learners, and a rapidly diversifying student population, colleges and universities

must adapt. In a study by Mino (2004), findings indicated that the traditional curriculum, teaching goals, instructional strategies, and methods of assessment all needed to be re-evaluated. Instead, a more dynamic curriculum is being proposed based on the specific needs of a diverse student body.

Advantages of Learner-centeredness

The review of the literature reveals a long history of documented advantages to learner-centeredness. Because efficacy of teaching and success in student learning is paramount, learner-centeredness as a possible solution has received much scrutiny (D. M. Brown, 2003). Founded in 1919, the Progressive Education Association conducted a study called the “Eight Year Study” from 1932-1940. This study focuses on evaluating learner-centered education (Henson, 2003). The Progressive Education Association found that students in learner-centered classrooms were more aware of world events, were more objective, had superior ambition and leadership skills, were more creative and curious and had better grades along with more academic awards (Henson, 2003). Henson (2003) goes on to say that psychologists suggest learner-centeredness is essential for healthy development.

Several beneficial factors are related to learner-centered education. First the supportive relationship between teacher and student characteristic of learner-centered classrooms enhances the learning process by fostering a safe, supportive environment (Mino, 2004). This idea of relationship being key to student success is also reinforced by Mougel (1998) and Weimer (2002). Additionally, when students feel appreciated for their individual differences as in learner-centered education, learning is more effective (Mino, 2004). Finally, studies have suggested that learner-centered classrooms increase trust in

the teachers (McNeill, 2006) enhance the students' motivation to learn and their ability to retain knowledge (King, 2000) and in general, are more effective (Reese, 1994).

Austuto's (1995) study finds that learner-centered schools, in contrast to the traditional teacher-centered school, engender a greater responsiveness to the problems of society and are more likely to lead to higher educational achievement. Another study suggests that students educated in learner-centered classrooms have more motivation, critical thinking skills and perform better (Dunn, 2008). The idea of enhanced motivation is also reported by Grillos (2007) who goes on to say students in learner-centered classrooms are also more accountable for achieving learning outcomes and are more involved. Miglietti (1994) reports that learner-centered teaching enhances students' sense of accomplishment and overall satisfaction with courses. Students in learner-centered classrooms also report earning higher grades (Miglietti, 1994).

Another tangible benefit to learner-centered education is the ability to address the needs of a diverse group of students. McCombs (1997) asserts that while curriculum and content are important, what is fundamental to successful education is attending to the unique needs of individual students. Learner-centeredness is especially effective at accommodating this diversity. The author goes on to say that for schools to implement learner-centered education, faculty members must appreciate the full spectrum of student differences and needs (B. L. McCombs, 1997).

This concept of valuing diversity in the classroom is also supported by Mino (2004) who further states that the diverse community of learners in today's post-secondary educational settings is not being served by the traditional lecture style of teacher-centered classrooms. Instead, students benefit from learner-centered education,

which values their diversity and in fact has curriculum designed around capitalizing on the diversity found in the classroom (Mino, 2004).

A diverse student population suggests that multiple learning styles need to be addressed. Grillos (2007) believes that learner-centered education is ideally suited to accommodating different learning styles and helps students to build on prior learning. Finally, K.L. Brown (2003) found that learner-centeredness is an excellent model for facing the numerous challenges found in today's classrooms because of the diversity of the student population.

Another perceived benefit from learner-centered education is the fact that it is able to address the social needs of students. Vygotsky suggests that learning is a social endeavor. The use of collaborative learning found in learner-centered classrooms supports the social nature of learning (D. M. Brown, 2003). In addition, students who interact socially with peers, and with their teachers, who serve as facilitators, make greater sense of what they are learning and are more readily able to apply new knowledge to prior learning (Egerton, 2007). A study by Grillos (2007) finds that when students work in collaborative groups, they learn each other's names and develop relationships that continue outside of class. This creates an environment of trust and safety, which enhances learning. In addition, students develop better self-esteem and learn how to learn.

The activity level of students in learner-centered classrooms is also higher than in the traditional teacher-centered classroom where instruction primarily consists of the teacher transmitting their knowledge to the students (Anton, 1999). Grillos (2007) looks at implementation of learner-centered activities for different college faculty members. He

finds that the active nature of students in a learner-centered environment leads to better understanding and retention of knowledge. He says that having students engage actively in discussion alleviates the monotony of lecture-based instruction. Finally, placing the student in the center of the learning and in an active role builds a sense of involvement and responsibility with the student (Henson, 2003).

Another benefit of learner-centered teaching is enhancing students' critical thinking skills. Vega and Taylor (2005) find that shifting from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered model necessitates greater involvement from students making them exercise more control over their learning and developing better critical thinking. Grillos (2007) supports this claim saying that learner-centered education develops more than superficial learning causing students to think on a different level. In a study on nursing education, Egerton (2007) finds similar results. Students in passive, teacher-centered classrooms are less able to apply concepts learned to real world situations because of a lack of critical thinking. This contrasts with students in learner-centered education who are able to make decisions based on their own assessment, research, reasoning, and critical thinking (Egerton, 2007).

Student engagement is another benefit of learner-centered education identified in the literature. Vega and Taylor (2005) found that the shift from faculty teaching to student learning leads to students taking a more active role in planning and implementing their own learning. This level of participation leads to more engagement among students and between students and teachers. Similarly, Mougel (1998) found that students in learner-centered classrooms participated more, interacted more, asked more questions, and displayed a more positive attitude. This increased level of activity appeals to students

who much prefer ‘doing’ as opposed to ‘sitting’ (Grillos, 2007). When students are more engaged, exercise more autonomy, and take greater responsibility for achieving learning outcomes, they develop a greater sense of motivation and are more willing to focus their energy on succeeding (Conti, 1978).

Grillos (2007) also finds other examples of engagement such as students feeling more awake and alert, taking more responsibility for classroom content, and in general, being happier in the classroom setting. The benefits of enhanced engagement also impact teachers. Grillos (2007) finds that instructors feel revitalized from learner-centered education and did not feel they were lecturing from stale power point presentations year after year. Finally, Mougel (1998) asserts that with learner-centered education, students have more opportunities to be involved in the classroom, are able to express their personal experiences more readily, have more access to the teacher and other students and feel less anxiety and greater learner satisfaction.

Studies involving second language acquisition (SLA) also identify benefits of using a learner-centered approach (Anton, 1999; Mougel, 1998). This is especially relevant to my study because it deals specifically with students learning ASL as a second language as they progress towards becoming ASL/English interpreters. Mougel (1998) finds that the supportive and low-anxiety environment characteristic of learner-centered education facilitates second language acquisition by students. When students feel supported by their peers and their instructor they are more comfortable using newly acquired skills in a second language. Learner-centered classrooms provide students with opportunities to negotiate form, content, and classroom expectations (Mougel, 1998). Allowing students to negotiate meaning fosters the concept of scaffolding and the zone of

proximal development, (ZPD) proposed by Vygotsky (Anton, 1999). In addition, the collaborative nature of learner-centered education supports the socio-cultural nature of constructivism inherent in the ideas of Vygotsky and the ZPD (Anton, 1999; Mougel, 1998).

Finally, students engaged in learner-centered classrooms who take more responsibility for their own learning can develop deeper understanding of concepts. This leads to an ability to learn continuously and to adapt their learning as their knowledge and life circumstances dictate. Fostering a sense of life-long learning may be one of the primary benefits of learner-centered education (Grillos, 2007; Pillay, 2002).

Barriers to Implementing Learner-centeredness

Even though there are many recognized benefits to implementing learner-centered education at the post-secondary level, not everyone is ready or willing to commit to making such a change. Vertin (2001) asserts that the culture of the institution is crucial to the successful implementation of learner-centered principles. For many, it comes down to the old adage of change is scary. According to Dunn (2008), the concerns that teachers express about adopting learner-centered teaching is based on their affective response to something new and different which they might not fully understand. In a study by Andrews (2008) resistance to adopting learner-centered practices stems from a comfort with doing things the old way as both a student and for many years as a teacher. In addition, most college classes are content heavy and are taught mainly using lecture and assessment (Mino, 2004).

This familiarity and entrenchment make it difficult to adopt new paradigms. This sentiment is echoed by both Grillos (2007) who reports one faculty member reminiscing

about listening to rousing lectures as an undergraduate and how much they enjoy listening and taking notes and King (2000) who states that longstanding beliefs held by teachers and administrators in institutions make it difficult to embrace a new approach. Citing continuing use of lecture in post-secondary classrooms, Richardson & Miller (2011) believe that a greater understanding of the pedagogical choices that faculty members make is crucial for implementing a more learner-centered approach.

Austuto (1995) finds that the reluctance to adopt a learner-centered paradigm might be more deeply embedded suggesting that the status quo in higher education is based on a system of merit and is driven by business and industry which do not value the student as anything other than a contributor to the workforce, ideas in direct opposition to learner-centeredness.

Faculty members also play a role in resistance to adopt learner-centered practices. Both Taylor-King (2001) and Stolt-Krichko (1997) finds differences in application of learner-centeredness in the classroom when comparing full time with adjunct faculty. Adjunct faculty members scored lower than full time faculty across seven different indicators of learner-centered practices in the classroom suggesting a need for further staff development for adjunct faculty (Taylor-King, 2001). Likewise, adjunct faculty members less frequently employ learner-centered strategies, less likely aligning with institutions that adopt learner-centered philosophy (Stolt-Krichko, 1997).

Other authors find that some faculty members believe academic discipline influences whether or not learner-centeredness is a viable option. Some feel that the course being taught is the primary determining factor. The faculty members who follow the National Standard Curriculum for paramedics for example, hold that this curriculum

necessitates a teacher-centered approach where the needs of the students are not taken into consideration (DeVito, 2008). While Grillos (2007) concedes that some instructors are reluctant to adopt learner-centered practices because of their academic discipline, he also finds that other faculty members believe strategies of learner-centered education are applicable regardless of discipline. Grillos (2007) does go on to say that class size might be more of a consideration since learner-centered approaches may be more time consuming in larger classes as compared to smaller classes.

Regardless of class size, another criticism of learner-centered education is the concern over how much time it can consume. Some instructors express concerns about having to reduce the amount of content covered in their course because of things like collaborative or problem-based learning (Flint, 2004; Grillos, 2007). An additional concern is that somehow learner-centered curriculum means watered down (Vertin, 2001).

Other examples of faculty resistance to adopt a learner-centered philosophy are reported by Andrews (2008) who finds that instructors' reluctance could be tied to a lack of communication from administrators; Dunn (2008) who reports that pre-service teacher training had not addressed concerns about the efficacy of learner-centered education; and Grillos (2007) who reports that while research based approaches to instruction are important, learner-centered education is viewed as merely a passing fad. This suggests that some faculty members may not fully understand learner-centered education or how to adopt learner-centered practices for their subjects.

In fact, lack of awareness on the part of faculty members is frequently found to be a barrier to implementing learner-centeredness. Andrews (2008) posits that teaching is

not an innate ability and must be learned. Reese (1994) reports that neither teachers nor students may be completely aware of what learner-centered education means and are lacking in knowledge about current research in adult education. Reese (1994) further states that faculty members frequently are unable to articulate exactly what their philosophy about teaching is or where it comes from. To go one step further, Polly & Hannafin (2011) discover that awareness of learner-centered principles is not sufficient to ensure learner-centered practices in the classroom. Their study shows a distinct disconnect between teachers' perceptions of their learner-centered behavior and their actual learner-centered behavior. In other words, the teachers in their study feel they are more learner-centered than they actually demonstrate.

Barrett (2007) reports that community colleges could not transition successfully to a learner-centered paradigm if faculty members were not aware of what learner-centeredness was. In a study of nursing education, Egerton (2007) finds that many nursing faculty lack any formal preparation in pedagogy or andragogy and teach following the models they are familiar with from their own college experiences as students. This lack of awareness or familiarity with learner-centeredness limits the effectiveness of any attempts to transition to a more learner-centered model (Vega & Taylor, 2005).

Expectations from students are also mentioned as one barrier to successful implementation of learner-centered education. Grillos (2007) finds resistance from some students who are not interested in learning collaboratively and having to depend on their peers for information. Similarly, students report 'tuning out' when new strategies are employed in the classroom. Other findings suggested that students are not as comfortable

with the teacher taking on a facilitator role, preferring instead the traditional teacher-driven model where the instructor is viewed as the definitive subject matter expert (Andrews, 2008; Grillos, 2007).

There is no question that the role the administration can play in making a transition towards learner-centered education is crucial. According to Austuto (1995) learner-centeredness is not compatible with the type of bureaucracy typically found in post-secondary education. Without support of administrators, many faculty members are reluctant to take risks with a learner-centered approach. Faculty members who are working towards tenure may not want to employ methods not valued by the administration (Grillos, 2007; Harris & Cullen, 2007). Harris and Cullen (2007) also point out the dilemma faculty members face when they are adopting learner-centered practices yet facing assessment by administrators who may value research and teaching. This is especially the case in disciplines where the emphasis is clearly on research and publication (Grillos, 2007). McCombs (1997) asserts that faculty members must have the support of administration in order for changes in teaching to be successful.

One clear step administrators could take would be to support faculty in their development as learner-centered educators. Faculty members identify the need for leadership and support from administrators, for current and new faculty members, in the transition to a learner-centered college (Andrews, 2008). DeVito (2008) also suggests that professional development is needed in order for faculty members to have the support they need to become learner-centered. However, one study finds that most human resource development trainers favor a teacher-centered model of service delivery (Bogart, 2003). Taylor-King (2001) extends the need for professional development in learner-

centered techniques to adjunct faculty as well. But training designed to develop learner-centered skills is not enough. In order to successfully implement learner-centered education, faculty members must also shift their perception of the benefits and meaning of learner-centeredness (Harris & Cullen, 2007).

Learning the Teaching Role

If you accept the supposition that thinking shapes behavior, then any effective change in behavior must begin with the thought process behind it. Taylor and Taylor (2003) and Reese (1993) both address the idea of teacher beliefs translating to practice. Competent educators realize that their beliefs about learning, their subject matter expertise, and their understanding of effective teaching practices will have an impact on what students master (Taylor & Taylor, 2003). Furthermore when teachers are able to articulate their personal epistemology on education, then this knowledge can lead to effective outcomes for their students (Reese, 1993). When teachers do not fully understand their own personal philosophy as it relates to education, then their teaching is inconsistent and can lead to student confusion (Atkinson, 1993). In order to successfully fulfill their role as learner-centered educators, teachers must understand their own beliefs about education (King, 2000).

Mougel (1998) proposes four basic theories of teaching. The first is transfer theory, which holds that knowledge is a commodity waiting to be transferred to the passive student as receiver. The second view is shaping theory, which states that the job of teachers is to shape students into some predetermined form. The third view is traveling theory in which the subject being explored is thought of as a territory with teachers serving as expert guides leading their students through new experiences. The fourth view

is growth theory, which addresses the intellectual and emotional development of the learner. However, these theories about teaching are normally acquired through formal pedagogical training, something post-secondary faculty members often lack.

Many faculty members in post-secondary education possess expertise in their content area but typically lack any formal training in teaching (D. M. Brown, 2003; Egerton, 2007; Harris & Cullen, 2007; Reese, 1994). In a study of nursing faculty, Egerton (2007) found that in the absence of any formal preparation in pedagogy or andragogy, many new faculty members resort to teaching how they were taught. This finding is supported in a study conducted by Reese (1994) who reports that many faculty members follow the models they had as undergraduates. Fanutti (1993) reports finding some faculty members who remembered what they disliked most in their undergraduate experience and then tried their best not to replicate that experience. In either case, these faculty members may have content expertise in their subjects, but typically lack knowledge or experience in theories regarding adult learning, alternative teaching methods, presentation techniques, or use of technology in instruction (Reese, 1994).

Harris and Cullen (2007) add that many individuals hired as assistant professors have no prior teaching experience at all. According to Barrett (2007) one possible explanation for this disconnection is that the latest research about teaching practices and learning simply may not be reaching the practitioners. In order to be successful, teachers need access to the research on learning and opportunities for their own

professional development. However, too often teachers are not fully aware of what constitutes effective learner-centered teaching because of their lack of awareness of current trends in adult education (B. L. McCombs, 1997; Reese, 1994).

Several studies looked at the role faculty development programs play in preparing faculty. In a study of nurse educators learning to teach, Fanutti (1993) finds that many faculty members credit their teaching abilities to formal coursework in pedagogy. A majority of the respondents mention taking courses in teaching methods, developing curriculum, adult education, teaching or learning theory and a teaching practicum (Fanutti, 1993). In contrast, Hewett (2003) reports that most pre-service teachers are introduced only to lecture methods and presentation styles and primarily engage in doing *to* students. This reflects a predominately teacher-centered approach with students serving as passive listeners (Hewett, 2003).

In a study of science teachers, McCormick (2000) reiterates the significance of the role that teacher preparation programs can play. She asserts how important it is that teachers be educated in learner-centered environments in order for these graduates to then work with their students in learner-centered ways. The accrediting body for science education goes so far as to say this is essential in order for teachers to make the paradigm shift necessary for learner-centered education (McCormick, 2000).

While subject matter knowledge was sufficient at one time, today's theorists know so much more about learning that needs to be taken into consideration (Harris & Cullen, 2007). Reese (1993) describes teaching as part science and part art. The complexity of the teaching/learning task means that faculty members must commit themselves to continually developing as practitioners (Reese, 1993; Taylor & Taylor,

2003). It is necessary for faculty members to be aware of the developmental theories as proposed by Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson as an important part of effective instruction (D. M. Brown, 2003). In addition to content knowledge, faculty members need to be adept at building relationships with their students (Reese, 1993) and aware of the kinds of activities that help students understand the discipline for themselves (DeVito, 2008).

If educators are to be effective in the learner-centered classroom, they need to commit themselves to becoming life-long learners and familiarize themselves with the broader concepts of teaching and learning (Henson, 2003). Perhaps Barrett (2007) best sums it up when she says that it is pointless for colleges and universities to adopt learning-centered philosophies if the faculty members do not fully understand what learner-centeredness means and how it is implemented in the classroom. Grillos (2007) asserts that teachers have a professional responsibility to do the best job possible educating students and to that end, should devote sufficient time to studying the research on learner-centered education.

While one researcher finds that a few individuals believe teaching to be an innate skill (Fanutti, 1993) most consider teaching to be a learnable activity. Fanutti (1993) states that many teachers credit their life experiences and professional experiences in their discipline with helping to shape their teaching ability. Several studies reference the issue of faculty development. Research has shown a positive correlation between faculty development and teachers' development as learner-centered instructors (French, 2001). The extent of professional development necessary for individual instructors depends on where they are in their career stage. Various stages are identified including novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert (Daley, 2003; McNeill, 2006).

DeVito (2008) describes effective teachers as those who possess both content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge necessary to teach. B. L. McCombs (1997) supports this assertion and adds that teachers also need to know about basic principles of motivation, learning, and psychological functioning. While professional development is important for teachers without a background in pedagogy, even those with degrees in education would benefit from a refresher in learner-centered teaching (Bogart, 2003).

Atkinson (1993) states that faculty development needs to address issues of teaching styles and behaviors in the classroom. In addition, teachers need exposure to learner-centered teaching and working collaboratively in order to maximize student achievement for adult learners (Atkinson, 1993). On a survey of faculty needs, teachers indicates that they would benefit from sessions on how to identify and correct their own mistakes, enhancing their teaching strategies, and learning from student feedback (Fanutti, 1993).

One way that faculty can take responsibility for their own professional development is by working with faculty mentors (Fanutti, 1993; Flint, 2004). In a study of peer mentoring as a method for developing learner-centered practices, Flint (2004) finds that faculty members benefit from having peer mentors leading their transition as learner-centered instructors. Fanutti (1993) finds that mentoring and observation of master teachers are effective in helping faculty members develop new teaching skills including handling difficult situations and creating an environment conducive to learning.

Another way that teachers can learn their role as learner-centered instructors is to listen to what their students are saying they need. Fanutti (1993) finds that teachers are able to learn from their students what works and what does not work in the classroom.

Attending to the specific needs of adult students is something that should be supported by adult education practitioners (Atkinson, 1993). For example, instructors need to be aware of the different learning styles their students have and the fact that not everyone learns at the same pace or in the same way (Bogart, 2003; D. M. Brown, 2003; Dare, 2001; Grillos, 2007).

D. M. Brown (2003) elaborates that teachers need to take into consideration their students' prior learning and structure the curriculum to build on that knowledge. When instructors encounter non-traditional students who may be less prepared for coursework, they need to be able to adapt in order to help their students succeed (French, 2001). Students learn best when the lessons are contextually relevant and the content is presented in the learning style most suited to the students' preference (Bogart, 2003; D. M. Brown, 2003).

Finally, reflection is an important part of teacher's learning their role as learner-centered educators. The concept of 'creating-self-as teacher' was proposed by Keir (1991) and is similar to the work of Schön regarding reflection-in-action. King (2000) goes so far as to say that reflection is part of the professional responsibility of all educators. D.M. Brown (2003) explains that teachers must be reflective practitioners; constantly evaluating their teaching and the impact they are having on students. This leads to better teaching and greater student achievement as faculty members develop their learner-centeredness (B. L. McCombs, 1997).

In fact, French (2001) says that critically thinking about their work is the first step teachers can take in improving their practice. If teachers are able to reflect on the efficacy of their teaching, they can use this information to guide changes in their practice.

However, it is important to provide them with the tools necessary to identify personal characteristics or practices that must change to benefit their students (B. L. McCombs, 1997).

One option for helping teachers develop into learner-centered educators relies on college and university human resource or faculty development centers. However, Bogart (2003) found that a majority of human resource development trainers preferred a teacher-centered approach to instruction and they rarely utilized learner-centered strategies. Bogart (2003) goes on to suggest that human resource development personnel need to become more aware of learning college principles.

So, how do new faculty members learn their role as teachers? McCombs (1997) suggests that whatever strategy is taken to help faculty members improve their teaching, administrative support is essential. But to reiterate the statements of Barrett (2007), it is ineffective for a college or university to adopt a learner-centered paradigm if the faculty members responsible for carrying out the mission do not understand the meaning of learner-centeredness and how it is implemented in the classroom.

Chapter Summary

Learner-centered education in the United States has an extensive history and is closely aligned with principles of adult education. In recent years, external forces like a changing student population, demands from employers and a globalized economy are necessitating changes in how colleges and universities function. Although there is significant empirical evidence that attests to the advantages of learner-centeredness, the concept is still not widely adopted by colleges and universities.

It is also clear that a lack of agreement among theorists about what it means to be learner-centered is counterproductive and contributes to the resistance to adopt learner-centered practices. Other deterrents to learner-centered practices are institutional culture, incompatible points of view of faculty members, differing approaches between full-time and adjunct faculty, influences based on academic discipline, student expectations for a more traditional teacher-centered experience, and finally, lack of awareness on the part of faculty members expected to implement learner-centered practices.

The review of the literature indicates that any attempt to adopt learner-centered education will necessitate the support of college administrators and the collaborative efforts of both full-time and adjunct faculty.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This chapter addresses why I chose a qualitative paradigm for inquiry, provides the reader with some context for situating the study, outlines the specifics with regard to data collection, management, and analysis and offers evidence of the rigor that will support the trustworthiness of the study design and execution.

Research Approach and Methods

Learner-centered theory provided the theoretical framework for this study which explored the construct of learner-centeredness for a group of ASL/English interpreter educators by asking the following research questions 1) What do faculty members believe is the meaning of learner-centeredness? 2) What influences do they believe shaped their understanding of learner-centered teaching? 3) How do they believe they apply learner-centered practices in their classroom? Because the purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs around learner-centeredness for a group of ASL/English interpreter educators, a naturalistic inquiry paradigm using an interpretivist approach was logical.

Method of Inquiry

I utilized naturalistic inquiry as my method of qualitative inquiry. Lincoln and Guba (1985) paint a broad-strokes picture of naturalistic inquiry by identifying five primary axioms of the naturalistic paradigm. The first has to do with the nature of reality. The naturalistic paradigm posits that there can be multiple realities coexisting simultaneously. Furthermore, these realities are constructed by those for whom they are

relevant and are bound to a specific context and therefore must be considered holistically and in situ. The next axiom proposes that the knower and the known are interactive and inseparable. Through the act of constructing meaning, there develops a relationship between the knower and the known whereby they influence one another. The third axiom addresses the issue of generalizability, a positivist construct. In naturalistic inquiry, rather than trying to formulate a theory that can be applied equally well in any context at any time, the aim is to create knowledge that is applicable to the individual case being studied. Any hypotheses generated are, by necessity, bound in time and context. The fourth axiom maintains that cause and effect are indistinguishable from each other. Rather, events and participants both influence and are influenced reciprocally in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping. The fifth axiom describes the effect of values on the inquiry process. Basically, because the inquiry process makes use of the human as instrument, the process cannot be insulated from the effect of values held by those involved. Consequently, all facets of the inquiry are under the influence of value systems related to the inquiry. This is in direct contrast to the positivist *value-free* stance on inquiry resulting from methodology designed to “remove all subjective elements from the inquiry situation” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 162).

The naturalistic inquirer accommodates the influence of values in the inquiry process by acknowledging them in every aspect of the inquiry from design, to data collection, through interpretation. In short, the human as instrument is both a potential strength and a potential source of distortion in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Contextual Background

Before I explain the details and justification for my study design and in keeping with the context bound nature of meaning in naturalistic inquiry, I need to provide some of the history that preceded this study. Providing this context will help clarify some of the decisions I made regarding study design, data collection, and data analysis. I was first hired as an adjunct instructor at SAC in the Department of ASL/IT during the summer of 2001. I took a tenure track position beginning in the fall semester of that same year. Four years later, and one year into the course work for my doctoral degree, I decided to take time off from my full-time teaching position to concentrate on my own education. A year later, I had completed enough hours towards my degree to allow me to resume full-time teaching.

I re-applied at SAC and was re-hired for the fall semester, 2006. As a *new* faculty member, I was given three hours of release time to attend the Murguia Learning Institute, (MLI). The MLI began in the fall of 2005 and had been created as part of the Quality Enhancement Program (QEP) at SAC, (San Antonio College, 2007) as a result of the accreditation process through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). One of the goals of the QEP is "...significantly improved student learning through enhanced teaching and support strategies" (San Antonio College, 2007). Newly hired faculty members at SAC attend the MLI each fall semester. During the spring semester, the MLI is made available to existing SAC faculty teaching developmental math, English, reading, or gatekeeper courses (San Antonio College, 2007). While one purpose of the MLI is to orient new faculty to the SAC environment, another focus of the MLI is to

introduce new faculty members to learner-centered education and articulate the college's goal for creating learner-centered classrooms. According to the program's director, "Our slogan is 'It's All About Learning' and I think that embodies our purpose with the MLI" (San Antonio College, 2005). The director also states, "This is a wonderful opportunity to positively impact an entire generation of new faculty" (San Antonio College, 2005). With the goal of improving student learning and outcomes as well as fostering the learner-centered beliefs and practices of newly hired faculty as goals of the MLI, the administration of SAC supports learner-centered teaching on this campus.

As a result of my experiences in the MLI, I began to think about the origins of my own beliefs about learner-centered education and how I might explore the issue formally. I was also interested in finding out how my colleagues felt about learner-centered education.

Site and Participant Selection

The department of ASL/English IT at SAC is unique in several ways including the number of students enrolled and the number and diversity of full-time faculty. In addition, the department has developed an innovative service delivery model for interpreting services that allows for more control of the student internship experience. Also, the department is the only ASL/English IT program in Texas to require passage of state certification for interpreters as a graduation requirement. Finally, it is the only ASL/IT program in Texas with accreditation by the Collegiate Commission on Interpreter Education, (CCIE) and with THECB Exemplary Status designation.

For these reasons, I selected this site for my study because this program is an ideal example of what Patton (2002) refers to as an intensity sample where "one seeks

excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 234). By using this particular mode of purposeful sampling and selecting information rich cases, I hoped to explore in detail the meaning that faculty members in the ASL/IT department make of learner-centeredness.

Although ASL had been taught as a foreign language at SAC since the early 1980s, the ASL/IT department at SAC began in 1994. There are several reasons why the faculty members of this department could be considered “exemplars of good practice” (Patton, 2002, p. 234) and therefore, are a good choice for this study of learner-centeredness. The ASL/IT department at SAC is unique compared to other interpreter training programs in Texas in terms of number of students enrolled, number and diversity of full-time and adjunct faculty, innovative service delivery model, CCIE accreditation and THECB Exemplary Status designation, and rigorous graduation requirements.

When I began teaching at SAC in 2001, enrollment in the ASL/IT program averaged around 500 students each semester. Student enrollment since the Spring 2010 semester has exceeded 700 students. Working with such a large and varied student population has afforded the faculty with insights that may be lacking in comparatively smaller ASL/IT programs. This contributed to the breadth and depth of the data that was available to be collected. Another reason this department was a good choice for my study was the number, and the diversity, of the faculty members. The department started with one full-time faculty member and one administrative staff position. At the time of this study, the department included eight full-time faculty members, two administrative staff positions, an information-technology support position, an interpreter services manager, two full-time interpreters and two lab personnel who operated the ASL resource lab.

There were also several adjunct faculty members who taught between two and five courses each during the semester that data was collected. This number of faculty members is in stark contrast to many ASL/IT programs in Texas which typically have one or two full-time faculty members. This may or may not be supplemented by adjunct faculty from the community.

The students in the ASL/IT program at SAC benefit from frequent contact with users of ASL from the Deaf community, building language skills as well as an appreciation for Deaf culture. The variety of Deaf and hearing faculty are able to offer a broad range of experiences to the students enrolled in the program.

In addition, the faculty members continue to be innovative in providing every opportunity for student success. One example of this innovation is the model for interpreter services delivery at SAC. The interpreting needs for all Deaf and Hard of Hearing students enrolled at Alamo Colleges is coordinated within the department of ASL/IT which affords more control and greater variety in the student internship course. In addition, in the fall of 2007, the THECB officially awarded Exemplary Status to the Department of ASL/IT at SAC. During the spring of 2012, the department also earned accreditation from CCIE. This department is also nationally acclaimed for interpreter training. Recognized as a leader in interpreter education in the state and around the country, the ASL/IT department at SAC has been a resource for other interpreter training programs by sharing the expertise of the faculty and the curriculum resources developed by the department. In addition, the various faculty members routinely provide in-service training to interpreters statewide and nationally.

Finally, the ASL/IT program at SAC is the only ITP in Texas that requires students to earn credentials from the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services, Board for Evaluation of Interpreters, (DARS, BEI) as a component of meeting the requirements for graduation. According to the 2009-2010 catalog for SAC, in order to earn the ASL: Sign Language Interpreter, Applied Arts and Science (A.A.S.) degree, “Students must pass a mid-program evaluation, the State Certification Basic Exam, as well as a program exit exam in order to complete degree requirements.” (Alamo Colleges, 2009, p. 191).

I used purposeful sampling to determine participants for this study. I chose only the faculty members who had taught a full-time course load in the 2010-2011 academic year. I specifically selected full-time faculty as participants in my study so that I could work with participants who had the maximum opportunity for impact on the student population. My research included the full-time faculty members (both tenure track and adjunct) in the ASL/IT department at SAC. Prior to data collection, I addressed the faculty and explained the purpose of my study. The participants included six full-time faculty members and one adjunct faculty member, who taught full-time during the 2010-2011 academic year. Of the seven participants, three self-identified as hearing while four self-identified as Deaf. There were also four females and three males. I gave each participant a consent form that explained the purpose and nature of the study, methods of data collection, the commitment expected of them for participation, the risk and benefit potential of the study, an explanation of how participants’ rights will be protected, and the fact that they were free to withdraw from participation at any time.

Data Collection

To understand learner-centeredness from the perspective of faculty members in the department of ASL/IT, I used two primary sources of data. The first was interviews of the individual participants. The second was documents relevant to learner-centered practices in the classroom, which included course syllabi and students' evaluations of instructors. An additional secondary source of data was field notes recorded after each of the interview sessions. Each of these sources of data will be handled in the following sections. Using three sources of data contributed to the level of detail necessary to accurately portray the lived experience of each of the participants.

Interviews.

Seidman (2006) states "I interview because I am interested in other people's stories" (p. 7). My approach was similarly motivated and I chose to use more of an informal conversational style following a general interview guide. There are several benefits to using interview guides, including making efficient use of the interview time, providing a more systematic and comprehensive process across multiple participants and maintaining focus while still allowing for the variability in participants' perspectives and experiences to unfold (Patton, 2002). While I began each interview with a list of questions intended to guide the process, I took the opportunity to explore further any items of particular interest that came up during each interview. One of the benefits inherent in using a qualitative approach is that the research is generally guided by the participants and does not follow some predetermined direction outlined by the researcher (Creswell, 2003).

Individual interviews of up to one and one half hours each began in the fall of 2010 and were repeated for each participant two additional times, approximately one week apart. In order to better focus my attention on each individual participant, I only engaged in one interview cycle at a time. Preventing my interactions with participants from overlapping helped me maintain an individual focus on each participant without distractions. Seidman (2006) recommends a three-interview protocol with each of the interviews having a slightly different focus. The first is to explore the life history of the participant as it relates specifically to the construct of interest. The second interview explores the details of the experience of the participant in order to learn as much as possible about the topic of inquiry. The third interview is focused on guiding the participant through a reflection process to explore the meaning of the intellectual and emotional connections relevant to the inquiry.

While I did follow this three-interview protocol, I adapted the respective focus of each interview session accordingly to better meet the needs of my study. For the first interview, I asked participants to explore their beliefs about what it means to have a learner-centered approach to teaching. In the second interview, my intent was to discover the influences that may have contributed to their individual understanding of what learner-centeredness means, in essence, where does learner-centeredness come from. For the final interview, I asked participants to reflect on their specific practices in the classroom that they believe represented learner-centeredness.

Interview sessions were guided by a loosely structured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions (see Appendix A). I also made use of probing questions to follow up on responses provided in an effort to “increase the richness and

depth of responses, and give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired” (Patton, 2002, p. 372).

Conducting three interviews for each individual had several advantages. I was able to collect a large amount of data without a single interview session becoming too long or tedious. I also benefitted from the participants’ ability to reflect on any issues raised during the previous interview session. This period of reflection enhanced the subsequent interviews. Another benefit is that I was able to better manage the workload of interpreting (from ASL to English), transcribing, and conducting preliminary analysis. Also, I was able to develop follow-up questions for subsequent interviews, which allowed me to further explore incidents of relevance. Finally, triangulation through the repeated sessions helped build credibility of the study (Creswell, 2003; Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I conducted the interviews in the department conference room, providing a space that was both “familiar and comfortable” to participants (Patton, 2002, p. 39). The room was spacious enough to allow for the electronic recording equipment without lending a feeling of being overcrowded. In addition, the conference room was a neutral space with a large table and comfortable furniture. My point in selecting this room was to provide the ambiance conducive to the interview process and to help participants feel at ease during the interviews.

I collected basic demographic information from each of the participants at the first interview (see Appendix B). One characteristic of qualitative interviewing is the flexibility to allow the process to unfold naturally. This allowance for the unexpected is part of what makes qualitative research so beneficial (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner,

1995). While I began each interview session with a list of questions, I followed logical lines of inquiry as they presented themselves during the interview processes. I then adapted existing questions or formulated new questions for the subsequent interviews based on a cursory analysis of the data collected from the previous interview. This meant I was able to probe for an in-depth understanding of the construct of learner-centeredness to explore the concept fully.

One advantage I had as a researcher in this setting was the relationship I had already built with my colleagues. I have known some of these individuals personally and professionally for more than a decade. The mutual respect and rapport we share facilitated the interview process.

Documents.

The second type of data I collected were documents. I chose to collect documents as part of the data for this study to gain further insight regarding the practice of learner-centeredness. The documents I collected for each of the participants in my study included course syllabi and student course evaluations from the previous semester. Documents collected were scanned for key words, concepts, and ideas, which suggested a learner-centered paradigm. In addition, I looked for examples of language that might indicate disconfirming cases where teacher-centered principles were evident. However, the course syllabi and the student course evaluations proved to be only a limited source of information that provided minimal insight into my understanding of the concept of learner-centeredness.

Field notes.

Throughout the interview process, I kept field notes. During the actual interview, these field notes were kept to a minimum so that I could direct my full attention to the interview process. Immediately after each interview, I spent between thirty minutes and one hour adding to my field notes while my memory was still fresh. These field notes were also used to track additional observations that occurred while listening to the recorded versions of the interviews. This process was helpful in allowing me to observe convergent and divergent themes and served as a launching point for later analysis of the data.

Data Collection Summary

To summarize, this study of learner-centeredness from the perspective of faculty members in the department of ASL/IT at San Antonio College employed three sources of data. The first was interviews of the individual participants. The interview process involved a series of three interviews for each participant with one week between each of the interviews. One three-week interview series was completed prior to beginning the interview process with the next participant. The second source of data for this study was documents relevant to the practice of learner-centeredness in the classroom and included course syllabi and student's evaluations of instructors. Finally, I took field notes for each interview session. These field notes included key ideas that I noticed during the interviews. After the interviews, I spent time adding details and further developing important points made during the interviews. These field notes proved to be a useful starting point when I began the data analysis process.

Data Management

For this study I expected to collect a large amount of data consisting of many pages of text. The volume of data could quickly become unmanageable without a systematic approach to data recording, labeling, storing, sorting, and retrieval. I used the research software package, HyperResearch to aid in storing, sorting, and retrieving the data collected. I recorded all of the interviews and then hired a professional transcriber to transcribe each of the recorded sessions verbatim. I stored the transcripts electronically in a password secured file so that I could conduct further analysis of the data. For hearing participants, the interviews were recorded using digital audio recorders. I intended to use a second digital audio recorder simultaneously for purposes of redundancy in the event there were any technical issues, which prevented a device from recording. I chose to use the *Voice Memos* feature on my iPhone as the second recording device. The quality of the audio recording on the iPhone was far superior to the digital audio recorder, so it became my primary tool for recording.

For the Deaf participants, I conducted the interview sessions entirely in ASL, a visual language, and recorded video for each session. Using two digital video cameras, I recorded my questions with one camera while recording my colleague's responses with the second camera. After each interview, the two video recordings were then imported into iMovie 09 on a Macintosh computer. Using the picture in picture feature, I embedded the video of the questions within the video of the responses. This allowed me to see both the question and response as they occurred facilitating my process in interpreting the ASL into spoken English.

I interpreted the video interviews from ASL into spoken English and recorded the interpretation on Voice Memos feature on my iPhone because the audio was of better quality compared to the digital audio recorders I purchased for this study. These audio recordings were then burned to a CD and given to the transcriber that I had hired to assist in transcribing all of the data for my study. After each interview was transcribed, I provided printed transcripts of each interview to the respective participants (both hearing and Deaf) to verify the accuracy of the information. These member checks are a necessary part of the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research. All audio recordings, video recordings, field notes, transcripts of interviews, and electronic files created in the course of this study were kept strictly confidential and stored securely in password protected files. Neither the video files nor audio files were available in their original form to anyone other than the dissertation committee, the professional transcriber, and me. For additional security against electronic failures, multiple copies of all transcribed data were stored on both my portable hard drive and on a secure drive at my college that was backed-up nightly.

Data Analysis

I began the preliminary data analysis process during the data collection phase. After the completion of each interview, I immediately sat down and added to my field notes. This helped me to remember critical incidents and also helped me gain a general sense of what participants had to say and what concepts and themes were emerging (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). This made it easier to adapt the following interview to clarify information or explore concepts further. I was also able to

observe the tone or affect used by the participants as they shared their stories. This was crucial for accuracy in retelling their stories in the final narrative.

To supplement the data collected through interviews and from documents, I also maintained a journal. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify three functions of a reflexive journal. One function is to maintain a logistical record of scheduling. A second function is to address methodological issues. The third function is to allow for a cathartic type of reflection on the research process. I used my journal to keep track of insights into my research questions, my own responses to the questions in the interview guides, interview strategies, and revelations as they unfolded. This journal served as a place to record my own understanding of learner-centeredness as I moved through the data collection process. I included in this reflexive journal my own responses to the questions on the interview guides as well as my perceptions of information gleaned from the interviews with my colleagues and what thoughts and feelings these interviews stirred in me. I also used this journal to record my “aha experiences” that occurred during the analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 142). The research journal was stored electronically. It also served as a log, for the practical purpose of scheduling interviews, maintaining timelines and other logistics.

For this study, I originally planned to draw on grounded theory and use a combination of open and axial coding to facilitate analysis of the data collected. However, after the initial process of interviewing, note taking, and journaling, the data seemed to suggest a simpler and more straightforward process. I began the analysis process during the interview phase by taking notes during and immediately after the interviews. During these interview sessions, I made brief notes of particularly relevant

concepts that were emerging. Immediately after each interview I spent additional time adding to my notes of the interview while my memory was still fresh.

I had originally planned to do all of my own data transcribing. After soliciting advice from several individuals, I decided to spend my time engaged in other tasks and hired a professional to transcribe the interviews. Verification of the transcripts involved reviewing the word files from the transcriber while listening to the original recordings to confirm accuracy and to ensure that the transcripts were created verbatim. During this process, I was able to simultaneously observe important key words, critical incidents, and emerging themes.

This process of multiple iterations of reading and listening to the data facilitated the data analysis process at this stage (Creswell, 2003). This exploration phase gave me yet another opportunity to discover and think about relevant concepts in the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Before beginning the actual coding process, I read each transcript an additional time. By this point, I was very familiar with the content of each interview and their similarities and differences. I made use of data reduction by only coding information relevant to my study. Any extraneous comments or unrelated discussion from the transcripts were ignored. However, during this process I was careful to include all the information from the interviews that was relevant to my study whether the information was confirming or disconfirming of information gleaned during the literature review. The coding process consisted of multiple iterations. After a first, second, and third pass at coding the transcripts and refining my coding scheme, I ended up with a total of 80 individual codes.

After completing the coding passes, I began working with the individual codes and grouping them in to clusters, thematically. I printed each of the codes onto a separate index card for ease in sorting them into different groups. This process involved reviewing each of the codes and looking for relationships among various codes. This allowed me to work from individual specific codes and combine them into more general categorical clusters. The next phase of analysis proved challenging for me. I struggled with how to make sense of the different clusters of categories and their relationship to the three research questions guiding my study. I kept encountering clusters that seemed to overlap.

For example, one cluster could address both research question one and research question three. I experimented with several organizing structures trying to come up with a conceptual and descriptive framework that would account for all the code clusters and their applicability to multiple research questions. Finally, I decided upon a Venn diagram with overlapping circles, one circle for each of the three research questions. This allowed the flexibility I was seeking in a data display capable of accommodating the richness of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and offered greater possibilities for drawing conclusions.

While it was interesting to see which clusters of codes applied to each of the three research questions, it was also interesting to see where clusters of codes applied in the overlap between research question one and research question three. However, I think just as interesting were the gaps where there were no clusters of codes for the overlap between research questions.

At this point in my analysis of the data, I invited a colleague, who is an experienced researcher, to review the coding scheme, clusters, and the Venn diagram

representing the conceptual and descriptive framework of the data. I was careful to maintain the anonymity of the participants during this process. While she was in no way affiliated with my study, she was able to make sense of the coding scheme and clusters I had developed. She also confirmed that the data display of the Venn diagram accommodated the data well and made sense on an intuitive level.

After confirming that the analysis thus far made sense to an outsider, I proceeded to refine the connections between and among clusters and to initiate the interpretation process. The details of my findings will be covered in the next chapter. In the next few sections of this chapter, I will address specific issues that inform the reader as to the quality of work and the rigor I used in conducting my study.

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the issue of trustworthiness is of primary concern to the consumers of qualitative inquiry. That is to say, as a researcher I need to remember the reader will ultimately decide whether this study merits their confidence. They also present the analogues to trustworthiness for research conducted in the quantitative paradigm in terms of the more familiar, validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While validity and reliability are not goals of qualitative inquiry, there are standards that should be met to instill confidence in the reader that the study in question is trustworthy.

Seidman (2006) asserts that qualitative researchers need to be mindful of the fact that we do have influence over the research process. It is the human as instrument that asks the questions, chooses the follow-up and probing questions, shares their own experiences and insight, chooses the relevant sections of the transcript for coding and

analysis, and then engages in the interpretation, description, analysis, and reporting of the data (Seidman, 2006). The first step towards mitigating this potential source of distortion is to acknowledge the fact of its existence.

For my study, I was acutely aware of the possibility of my own bias and how that had the potential to affect my interpretation of the data, especially since my participants are also my faculty colleagues. This was one of the challenges of being an insider. I have dealt with this potential for bias by being transparent about my relationship to the participants, acknowledging that my relationship is a source of potential bias, providing my own responses to the questions in the interview guide, and preserving the actual words of the participants when presenting my findings.

Another factor that could contribute to researcher bias is the fact that I consider myself to be a learner-centered educator. I believe that learner-centeredness is effective for educating adults. In addition, I work in an institution that supports creating a learner-centered environment. All of these steps are intended to offer the reader a foundation upon which to base their opinion about the trustworthiness of my study.

To frame their discussion of trustworthiness specific to naturalistic inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1985) begin by identifying four global goals applicable to research in both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms. These are 1) truth value - the means by which the researcher establishes the *truth* of their work. 2) applicability - the extent to which the findings of the study may be applied to other settings and participants. 3) consistency - how to determine if the findings are replicable with similar participants and context. 4) neutrality - how to show that the interpretations are accurate and reflect the actual subject under scrutiny rather than researcher influences.

When these standards are applied to naturalistic inquiry, the terminology adapts accordingly. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. They go on to say that these are correlates of the quantitative concepts of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. The next section will elaborate on the credibility and transferability strategies I implemented for building trustworthiness according to Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify several strategies for building credibility in naturalistic inquiry. The first is prolonged engagement. They define this concept as “the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). Conducting three separate interviews of ninety minutes each afforded me the sufficient time to fully explore themes of interest in the interviews. In addition, I have certainly invested sufficient time within the setting to build rapport with the participants and to understand the culture within which they operate.

I have been a professional colleague with the participants in my study, working in the ASL/IT department since 2001. This familiarity assisted me in establishing the connection with the study participants. However, this could potentially have been a disadvantage as well. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) everyone has secrets to hide. They elaborate by pointing out that participants may withhold the truth especially if they feel that outside interests are being served by the research or that anonymity may become an issue. Another consideration is that participants may respond consciously or unconsciously in such a way as to appease the researcher. I made sure that I was attuned to these possibilities as this project proceeded (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The second strategy for building credibility identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) is persistent observation. Creswell (2003) addresses the same concept calling it repeated observation. Another author refers to this strategy as multiple session interviews (Glesne, 1999). For this study, I conducted three different interviews with each participant at one-week intervals beginning in the fall of 2010. The benefit of this type of data collection strategy is that participants had the time after interviews to engage in a reflective process about their responses. Participants then had the opportunity to reformulate their thoughts outside of the pressure of an interview situation (Glesne, 1999). Having multiple meetings with participants contributed to the atmosphere of collegiality where the researcher and participant could build rapport. Additionally, I was able to process the information gleaned from each interview in order to guide the subsequent interview session. This also contributed to the value of the information gained (Creswell, 2003; Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A third strategy for building credibility in qualitative studies is triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although other authors have proposed different types of triangulation, my use of the term triangulation refers specifically to the practice of data collection using multiple sources (Creswell, 2003; Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By collecting data from multiple in-depth interviews, documents, field notes, and my own reflective research journal, I added a perspective that would be missing if I only used one source of data.

A fourth approach for building credibility is to indicate when I encounter information contrary to the concept being investigated. Glesne (1999) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this as negative case analysis. Creswell (2003) and Patton (2002)

address this same concept using the terms negative or discrepant information and disconfirming cases respectively. Noticing and preserving incidents that do not indicate a learner-centered perspective is important for building the trustworthiness of the research.

The final component of credibility building that I have included in this study is the use of member checks. This process involved providing the participants with transcripts of their interviews as well as my interpretations of their responses as they relate to the overall concept of learner-centeredness. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) these member checks can be done during the process or at the end. My strategy was to use member checks during the data collection phase and again after the preliminary analysis was completed.

Reflexive Statement

A final component of trustworthiness is to reveal my stance as the researcher as I began this inquiry process. Creswell (2003) refers to this as “clarifying the bias the researcher brings to the study” (p. 196). Glesne (1999) discusses the same concept in terms of the subjective lens that the researcher brings to the work. She states that rather than try to deny the subjectivity, as qualitative researchers we should embrace our subjectivity. An awareness of this subjective lens lets us feel our emotions. This is what allows the researcher to fully engage the participants and to understand those we study. Glesne (1999) suggests learning to recognize the feelings that come from the research we do. Only then can we question ourselves about the meaning of the emotions. This attention to our subjective lens serves to enrich the researcher in the process.

As an interpreter educator in both the formal sense, as a faculty member at the department of ASL/IT at SAC, and in the informal sense, as a provider of professional

development offerings for working interpreters, I have adopted an approach to interpreter education that can best be described as learner-centered.

My experiences with sign language interpreting began in the mid-1970s as a young student of ASL. Since that time I have been primarily employed as a sign language interpreter working in a variety of community and education settings. I spent many years working as an interpreter before I completed any formal education. By the time I transitioned from practitioner to educator, I had completed a bachelor's degree in general studies and a master's degree in applied linguistics.

When I began my formal teaching career at the community college, I faced the prospect of refining, and in many cases, developing my skills as an interpreter educator. This adjustment was a difficult one for me for several reasons. I felt unprepared for my new role in the formal training of sign language interpreters. I felt an acute lack of role models or mentors to facilitate my development as a competent faculty member. I was overwhelmed at the prospect of sifting through the abundance of literature on effective teaching. And finally, there was a complete lack of curriculum for many of the courses I taught.

During my experiences with the MLI, I was introduced to the concept of learner-centered education. This introduction led to my own desire for further study of the theoretical construct of learner-centered education. Through several semesters of trial and error and intensive reflection on my own teaching beliefs and practices, I have finally reached a point where I feel like my instruction is more grounded in my discovery of and belief in learner-centeredness as an appropriate method for engaging adult learners.

Ethical Considerations

This project was subjected to all of the protections afforded by the Institutional Review Board at Texas State University-San Marcos. The projected completion of the research was December, 2012. In addition to IRB approval from Texas State, I also secured permission through the appropriate administrative channels at SAC. I have presented the experiences shared by each of the participants in this study in a narrative style using pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants. I gained informed consent from each participant by disclosing the nature and duration of the study as well as their rights in agreeing to participate in the study. Their rights include:

- Participation in the study is completely voluntary
- Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time
- Participants can refuse to answer any question without explanation
- Participants can contact the researcher anytime throughout the study to ask questions and seek clarification
- Data obtained from the study may be used in the write-up of the study and any potential publications
- Participants have the right to know perceived benefits and risks associated with the study

There were additional ethical considerations necessary for this study. One involved the fact that I collected data from colleagues. I needed to be clear with my participants that I was interested in their beliefs and perceptions about learner-centered instruction. I also assured them that there were no correct answers. I was especially aware of their potential concerns during the interview process and did my best to put them at

ease. I worked hard to establish a feeling of collegiality in our discussions and to create a safe place to talk about beliefs around learner-centered education.

Another consideration was the fact that more than half of the interviews were conducted in ASL. This meant that there was an extra step of interpretation for the Deaf participants as compared to their hearing peers. The responses from the Deaf participants were interpreted from ASL into spoken English before the transcribing process. I served as the ASL/English interpreter for these interviews. An essential part of the interpreting process is an awareness of preserving the speaker's message, intent, and affect. I was extra vigilant regarding these aspects during my interpretation of the interviews conducted in ASL.

Personally, I was committed to conducting my research in an ethical manner with appreciation and respect for each of my faculty colleagues who participated in the study. In addition, I respected the values of good research that are upheld by the two institutions involved, SAC as the site of the study, and Texas State University-San Marcos as the degree granting institution.

Chapter Summary

In order to understand the perceptions of faculty members in the Department of ASL/IT at San Antonio College, I collected data using a series of three interviews with each participant and documents including; course syllabi, course evaluations, and field notes. In addition, I maintained a research journal.

I digitally recorded the audio from the interviews with the hearing participants in the study using Voice Memos on an iPhone. I also recorded the interviews with the Deaf participants. Because these interviews were conducted in ASL, I digitally recorded the

video from these sessions. Each of these interviews was then interpreted from ASL into spoken English with the audio being digitally recorded using Voice Memos on an iPhone.

All of the data collected from interviews and document review were coded selectively using data reduction. After initial themes were identified and coded, I identified clusters of these codes across the three research questions and assigned meaningful labels to them as well. This coding process allowed me to sort the data in meaningful ways.

While there is no substitute for the analysis done by the researcher, there are tools that make use of today's technology that can assist in this task. Use of specific software designed for this purpose facilitated the data organization process and helped in managing codes and clusters from the corpus of information studied. I imported all of the transcribed data, including the interviews, the researcher's notes, documents, and reflections from the research journal into HyperResearch for inclusion in the analysis process.

This chapter also included the steps I took to address the issues of trustworthiness and credibility of my work in conducting the study. In addition, I explained my relationship to the participants and the study itself and highlighted the ethical considerations for my study. In the next chapter, I will provide a narrative of the findings of my research preserving the thoughts and feelings of the participants in my study as accurately as possible.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter I present the findings from the analysis of the data that were collected. The goal of my study was to understand the construct of learner-centeredness for faculty members in the Department of ASL/IT at San Antonio College. Since my purpose is to explore the beliefs held by my faculty colleagues, a naturalistic inquiry paradigm employing an interpretivist approach was appropriate. Each of the participants shared with me their perceptions on learner-centeredness in addressing the three research questions guiding my study. These questions are included again here for clarity.

- 1) What do faculty members believe is the meaning of learner-centeredness?
- 2) What influences do they believe shaped their understanding of learner-centered teaching?
- 3) How do they believe they apply learner-centered practices in their classroom?

I begin the chapter by introducing the participants in the study. Each of them has chosen a pseudonym in order to provide some measure of anonymity. In introducing the participants I hope to provide the reader with a sense of each individual as a complex, caring, dedicated faculty member rather than just an abstract source of data. This section will also include two different tables presenting some basic demographic information about the participants.

After the introduction of the participants, I will present the themes uncovered in the data analysis. The three research questions will serve as the primary organizational structure for presenting the themes resulting from the data analysis process. Research question one contains two themes. The first includes instances where the participants in my study were able to provide a definition of learner-centeredness. The second includes instances where the participants in my study were not able to provide a definition, but they were able to describe learner-centeredness in detail. Research question two contains five themes. These are; 1) preparation as a teacher, 2) experiences as a learner, 3) institution specific influences, 4) discipline specific influences, and 5) intrinsic influences. Research question three contains four themes. These are; 1) teacher/student relationship, 2) psychological environment, 3) teacher behaviors, 4) other learner-centered behaviors, and 5) teachers as learners. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the findings from the analysis of the data.

Participants

Bev.

Bev is hearing and has been teaching at SAC for 27 years. This history affords her a unique perspective that few others share. During her interviews she is energetic and enthusiastic. These are qualities that I imagine serve her well in teaching. She is quick to respond and elaborates without prompting. It is clear that she enjoys talking about teaching. There is a genuine compassion for her students and her subject.

We quickly settle in to the pattern of question and answer. The process seems very natural and conversational. Bev is not only a rich source of information, she is eager to share what she knows. In the few instances where Bev does not seem to have a ready

answer to my question, she asks if we can return to the question later during the interview while she takes time to think it over. More than once she asks that we come back to a particular item at the next interview.

For subsequent interviews she arrives with folders at the ready. Apparently our first discussion triggered her recall about resources in her files related to learner-centered education. She mentions that she doesn't have a concrete memory of the material in the files but upon skimming them she has found that many of the practices have been incorporated into her teaching over the last few years. She seems to take much delight in this fact. Her excitement during the interview process is contagious. She shares with me how excited she is to be part of what she calls a noteworthy research project.

Dana.

Dana is hearing and has been teaching at SAC for just over one year. She is one of the newest faculty members to join the department. She appears nervous and seems worried about giving the right answer to my questions. I try to reassure her by telling her that I am interested in her opinion and that there are no right or wrong answers. This does not seem to have any effect and she stumbles with trying to express her ideas in the beginning. Eventually the discussion becomes more natural and she responds more freely and without the jitters apparent in the beginning. The things Dana has to say surprise me. So much of her story sounds similar to mine in that we both struggled with academics early in our education. We both felt limited by, what in the end proved to be misperceptions about our potential.

I find this revelation endearing and must force myself to focus on the task of interviewing, rather than becoming caught up, and thus distracted by the emotions. I

make some notes to myself to explore the concept of painful educational histories as possible influences to becoming a learner-centered practitioner. When Dana talks about her teaching, she conveys that she is confident in her abilities and continues to make use of collaborative learning activities in her class. She also revises her approach, as she needs to, in order to maximize student outcomes.

By the second interview, Dana seems much more confident and relaxed. She laughs easily without a hint of nervousness. Her responses are more automatic and supported with greater detail. Again, I am struck by the similarity in our stories.

Joshua.

Joshua is Deaf and has been teaching at SAC for 18 years. Joshua is the only person in his family to attend college earning both a BA and MA. He has an engaging personality. I can see why his students like him. He makes frequent use of his sense of humor during our preliminary session as well as during the three interview sessions. Joshua's responses to the questions are direct and detailed. Interview one goes according to plan without many diversions from the interview guide. I have now become so accustomed to the interview protocol that the discussions seem to be nearly second nature. At the end of our first interview, I explain to Joshua that the goal of our next interview will be to explore some of his experiences as a learner and then we schedule our next meeting.

To begin our second interview Joshua tells me he has been thinking about an experience he wants to share with me. As he begins, I am initially excited to hear another one of his stories. My eyes look alert and I am smiling in anticipation. As the story unfolds, it takes an unexpected turn. Joshua shares with me a particularly distressing

occurrence from his early experiences in elementary school. I am so unprepared for this revelation that I am nearly at a loss for how to proceed but Joshua needs little encouragement. He continues to share experiences with me that are meaningful and on topic. After my initial shock wears off, I am able to proceed with the semi-structured interview guide. I make a note to pay special attention to the beginning of interview two. I notice the similarities with Dana's painful educational experiences.

Calvin.

Calvin is Deaf and has been teaching at SAC for 11 years. He describes his personality as bold but at the same time, sweet. He can be described as an intellectual. Calvin is a deep thinker who likes mathematics, statistics, and reasoning. He is filled with curiosity about life in general and about the world. He comes across as very confident. He also has a well-developed sense of humor and this becomes evident during our sessions together. Calvin is quick to laugh, enjoys a good joke, and gets a mischievous twinkle in his eye when he is pulling your leg. He enjoys talking about his work and his experiences. He readily shares stories about his time as a student and as a teacher. It is clear that Calvin enjoyed being a student and also enjoys his work as a teacher. He mentions his family life growing up and the fact that his parents and siblings were always very supportive. Education was a priority growing up for each member of Calvin's family. This has obviously had an impact on his educational pursuits and very likely on his choice of careers as well.

I think I would have to say that the interviews with Calvin were different from the interviews with his colleagues. Calvin has lots of information to share. As I begin each interview with the first question on the interview guide, I need only interject occasionally

to direct him back on topic or to provide the next question in the interview guide. Calvin is very forthcoming with his perceptions about learner-centered education. I did not have to ask for elaboration or for Calvin to explain more about a particular topic. The information just flowed out of him for the entire interview session for each of the three interviews. This served as validation of how beneficial it is for these interviews to be recorded.

Diane.

Diane is Deaf and has been teaching at SAC for 20 years. Like Bev, the number of years that she has been involved in the program means that Diane has a wealth of knowledge to share. She uses few words and makes her point with great efficiency. The three interviews with Diane were the shortest interviews of all the participants. However, this seems to be due more to her efficiency in responding and her lack of superfluous language. It certainly is not because she does not have much information to share.

Initially Diane seems nervous with the interview process. Similar to Dana it seems as if Diane believes I have some expectations about what constitutes a right answer to my questions. After a little bit of reassurance, Diane relaxes and begins to share with me her thoughts on learner-centeredness. It is apparent that Diane cares about her students and enjoys her work as a teacher. She shares with me that she considers teaching her gift. This is how she gives back to the Deaf community by helping to teach interpreters.

Zeke.

Zeke is Deaf and is the newest member of the faculty. He has been teaching at SAC for one year. Zeke is very laid back. In the beginning of the interview process he

mentions that he feels like this is a job interview. I reassure him that I just want to have a conversation with him and find out his opinions about learner-centered education. After I let him know that his opinions are what I am interested in and that there are no right or wrong answers he easily settles in to an informal conversational style. Zeke is the only boy in his family and the only one of his siblings to graduate from college, earning both BA and MA degrees.

The series of interviews with Zeke bring up strong emotions for both of us. More than once we find ourselves taking a minute or two to decompress. Frequently, Zeke mentions the positive ways that his father influenced his career path and education. In spite of his limited experience teaching at SAC, Zeke proves to be a rich resource for information related to learner-centered education.

Alicia.

Alicia is hearing and has been working at SAC for seven years. Alicia smiles easily and her smiles linger on in her eyes. When she arrives for our first interview I get the sense that this is something she has been looking forward to. She seems excited about the interview process and genuinely seems interested and motivated in sharing her opinions about learner-centered education.

The sessions with Alicia seem effortless and more like engaging conversations than informal interviews. Her answers are thoughtful and detailed. If I need additional information, I only need to prompt Alicia minimally. One thing I notice about many of her responses is that it almost seems like she is thinking out loud. I like the feeling of being privy to what seems more like an inner dialogue that she has chosen to share. It also helps me see how carefully she is formulating each response.

Alicia shares a history of mostly positive educational experiences. She also shares some experiences with teachers that were not so positive. Teaching as a career path has been something that Alicia has been considering since childhood.

I was constantly surprised at my experience during data collection. I was moved by how genuinely willing each of my colleagues were to share their stories with me. I was also moved by many of their accounts. Some were similar to mine and others were different. All of the interviews were beneficial and some were quite poignant. It seems so obvious in retrospect but I honestly was not expecting the interview process to be so emotional. Several of the interviews brought up a variety of strong feelings ranging from excitement to sadness. I came out of this process with a profound sense of gratitude for my colleagues' stories, their willingness to share them with me, and a renewed respect for their personal journeys and how they contribute to the lives of their students.

While all of the participants in this study are currently my colleagues and co-workers, our history together extends back even further than our respective affiliations with SAC. I have known each of the individuals in my study for several years longer than our time together as co-workers. From the outset, I am aware that this could potentially provide challenges in the completion of my study. However, I went in to this process confident that our relationship would benefit the data collection process. By the end of the study, I felt like my personal and professional relationship with each of my colleagues ended up being advantageous to the collection of the data in my study.

Now that I have introduced the participants individually, I will address some additional details about them as a group. As seen in Table 1, there were four females and

three males participating in the study. Likewise, there were four Deaf participants and three hearing participants.

Table 1. General Participant Demographics

Gender	Hearing Status	Education	Years of Experience at SAC
Female: 4	Deaf: 4	Baccalaureate: 2	1-10 years: 3
Male: 3	Hearing: 3	Masters: 5	11-20 years: 3
			21-30 years: 1

In Table 2, you can see the degree held by each participant as well as their total number of years of teaching experience and their number of years of teaching experience at SAC. Joshua, Diane, Dana, Zeke, and Alicia have only taught at SAC.

Table 2. Specific Participant's Education and Years of Teaching Experience

Name	Education	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Teaching at SAC ASL/IT
Joshua	MS	18	18
Calvin	MS	17	11
Diane	MEd	20	20
Dana	BA	1	1
Zeke	MS	1	1
Alicia	BAAS	7	7
Bev	MS	40	27

Themes from Research Question One

The purpose of research question one was to determine what the participants believed to be the meaning of learner-centeredness. There were two general categories of responses to the question regarding the meaning of learner-centeredness. Faculty members were either able to articulate their version of a definition for learner-centeredness or they were not able to provide a definition per se but they were able to describe learner-centered behaviors. Only a few faculty members were able to offer a definition of learner-centeredness but all of the participants talked at length about what learner-centeredness looked like. Dana perfectly illustrates this point when she says, "...it's hard for me to put it into words because I see it as more of an action, so I have a difficult time expressing that verbally. But I could do it and show you. And again, that stems from the type of learner that I am, I have to have hands on."

In conducting the analysis of the data, one of my challenges was how to differentiate between a definition of learner-centeredness and an attempt at describing learner-centeredness. While I have to admit there seems to be a bit of ambiguity here, I did manage to distinguish between the two constructs while allowing some of the overlap inherent in the participants' responses. Calvin's comment is on point. "I mean really you can't separate them out, you know? Learner-centeredness includes so many factors and everything in the curriculum is going to overlap so you really can't separate individual components."

My decision making process in determining what was a definition and what was a description came down to the way the participants themselves framed their response. If they began their discussion with wording indicating that they were providing me with

their definition then that was how I coded that passage. Similarly, if they presented a response in terms of describing what learner-centeredness looks like or how someone might characterize learner-centeredness then the passage was coded as a description.

This section will be handled in two parts. First I will discuss the definitions of learner-centeredness proposed by my colleagues, and then I will present their various themes that provide descriptions of learner-centered behaviors.

Definitions of learner-centeredness.

Not all of the participants were able to articulate an actual definition for learner-centeredness but for those who did, their responses are presented in this section. Diane began by talking about learner-centeredness as an educational theory with multiple focuses. She stated:

Well, you know, the theory of learner-centeredness, I think that's requiring people to focus on students, they're skills, they're study habits, the collaborative learning.

Diane elaborated by saying that learner-centeredness is a theory that focuses primarily on students and their specific needs in the learning process. She said the following:

It's a theory where teachers observe their students and see where their skills and their abilities are, and look at their variety of learning styles, and then a teacher needs to be able to make everything work. The teacher must be able to adapt and meet each student where they are. And I can't think of myself, as "I'm the teacher. This is my way. This is how I do it." Then the students wouldn't learn anything. I have to look at the students. And when I am learner-centered, I look at them. I

have to focus on them. My responsibility is to get each student to learn the material and so I have to help guide students through the material.

This suggests several concepts are working simultaneously in learner-centered instruction. The ideas that students bring important skills to the classroom, students have various preferences for learning styles, that teachers must meet students at their level, and teachers serve in the capacity of guide are all consistent with the literature. As we can see from Diane's definition she addressed the concept of working with students at an individual level taking into consideration that not all students learn the same way or have the same foundational skills. Diane elaborated on the variety of learning styles by saying:

When I'm ready to teach my class and I have my curriculum, I make eye contact with all my students. And what I see is variety. A variety of skills, different learning styles, maybe one student learns one way, and that may be different than any other student. So I have to make sure that everyone has access to the same information and they all understand the same thing.

This necessitates that teachers need to be flexible in order to adapt to different students in their classrooms. In addition to realizing that her students are individuals with different skill sets and learning styles, she also suggested that an authoritarian approach is not part of her understanding of learner-centered instruction:

I think with learner-centeredness, the teachers and the students are on an equal plane. They should feel like they have a right to share their opinion and everything shouldn't be teacher directed.

Finally we can see that she considers the teacher as a 'guide' helping students to navigate the material. Diane elaborated on the concept of the teacher as a guide:

They're responsible for learning, but I'm responsible for making sure that they learn. And they have to do the homework. It's not like I put everything on them and then step out of it and say, "OK, it's your problem. Deal with it." I feel like it's my responsibility to guide them through that and we share the responsibility.

The definition of learner-centeredness proposed by Dana is similar to Diane's in that she considers students on an individual level and believes that her job is to meet them where they are and to work with each of them from there. She said:

My understanding is to take what the students have already acquired as a starting point, my frame of reference. So what I've seen, the information they have learned by the time they come to my class, we are applying that and as an instructor am trying my best to accommodate their needs and their strengths. But also I'm giving them the responsibility of becoming a more motivated learner and trying to really build upon the skills they have acquired going through our program.

This takes into consideration the variability among students and the need to work with students wherever they happen to be. We also see the importance of the concept of shared responsibility between teachers and students. This is a recurring theme that is consistent with the literature on learner-centered education. Dana continued with this point by saying:

I expect the students to come in with something. I'm gonna look at it as a two way street. I want them to be able to show me what they have learned so far and I will foster that and help them succeed but I'm also looking at it as a way to

accommodate their needs. I mean there's responsibility on them to be involved just as much. It's not gonna be just one sided. I expect more like a 50/50.

So for Dana, learner-centeredness included a component where the students and teacher share responsibility for the learning. Her colleague Diane also supported the perspective of *shared responsibility*, with students having more decision-making responsibility in the learner-centered classroom:

They should feel like they have the ability to be in control and to speak out and to ask questions and together we can make modifications. That's kind of what I think of in terms of learner-centeredness, that it's give and take, that I should get their feedback and I shouldn't just do what I do without getting input from the students.

Alicia also talked about the shared responsibility inherent in learner-centeredness when she defined learner-centeredness as collaboration. Her definition also included the idea of building on the skills students already have and the contributions they are capable of making. She said:

...the student, even though they're in that learning stage, has a lot to offer. And so their ideas come into play so it's much more collaborative in that state as opposed to just one sided.

Alicia also suggested that learner-centered teaching necessitates making learning relevant to students and for teachers to be willing to do whatever is necessary to foster students' understanding of the concepts being taught:

Learner-centered teaching includes teaching new ideas to students making them applicable to them and also being willing to not just teach but getting into the nitty gritty of working with the student on these particular applications.

To sum up this section, most of the participants did not have a ready response when it came to defining learner-centeredness in the classroom. A few of them asked to revisit the question of a definition for learner-centeredness at the second interview, after they had time to think about it. Of the seven participants in the study, nearly half of them did not articulate a definition for the term at all. This is consistent with the trend I observed in the literature. Many of the studies on learner-centered education offered detailed descriptions of learner-centered behavior. But studies where learner-centeredness was given a straightforward definition were the exception rather than the rule. Paying careful attention to the way the participants presented their responses allowed me to differentiate between a definition and a description of learner-centeredness.

In their various attempts at explaining their understanding of the meaning of learner-centeredness, the participants in my study have identified several key components. First, students come into our classrooms with a variety of experiences and abilities. It is our job as teachers to recognize those abilities and to adapt to the unique needs of each student. In doing so, teachers should capitalize on the contributions that each student can make to the classroom. In addition, faculty members need to be aware that students will have a variety of preferred learning styles.

Teachers also need to make the learning experience relevant for students and be willing to serve as a guide, working collaboratively with their students. The responsibility for learning should be shared equally between the teacher and student. And, in addition to

a shared responsibility for learning, teachers should allow students some authority for decision-making.

Description of learner-centeredness.

While only about half of the participants offered a definition of learner-centered education, all of them were able to describe learner-centered education in some detail. The descriptions of learner-centeredness clustered around three sub-themes. Listed according to how frequently these comments appeared in the data they are; 1) teacher and student relationship, 2) psychological environment, and 3) adapting to students' needs. I will discuss them in that order in this section.

Teacher and student relationships.

Dana illustrated the importance of the teacher and student relationship when she said, "every opportunity and interaction with the student is a learning opportunity." I consider this to be a key idea and one that helps explain why we need to place such importance on building relationships with our students.

Alicia approaches the concept of relationship by treating all of her students fairly. "I don't want to be seen as exhibiting favoritism. I try to treat everyone fairly." She continued her point about fairness and included the importance of recognizing that each student is a unique individual:

You have to treat everyone fairly. You have to be fair with each person as an individual and look at the student as individuals. Everyone has different needs, and motivations, and goals and objectives.

In addition to treating students fairly, Alicia suggested that building rapport with your students is key to learner-centered education. She said:

It's important to establish rapport, to build that connection, to guide the students, to work with them individually one by one as much as possible, not just teach from the book, but to teach and incorporate your personal experiences.

During his interviews, Zeke suggested that teachers should have “a positive relationship with your student.” He captured the essence of this construct when he talked about the importance of mutual respect between teachers and students and the importance of valuing and respecting students. He said:

A teacher should have the student's respect. They should honor their ideas and their opinions and I think that way, the students feel a little inspired. Rather than feeling if the teacher is too critical, they feel deflated and that can mean we as a teacher need to show honor and respect to the students for their opinions and ideas and we should just honor who they are. Honor their comments; be supportive of their ideas, support who they are.

Bev also recommended “showing respect for students”. She specifically mentioned treating “all students with respect.” During her second of three interviews, Bev was eager to show me some literature on learner-centered instruction that she had run across in her files. She was most excited about the fact that she had incorporated many of these practices in her teaching. Citing her own resource, she referred to being “respectful in all dialogues, however they occur.”

Alicia also talked about the importance of the teacher and student relationship. “I think that there’s more interaction with the teacher, much more rapport that has to be developed.” Zeke then took this concept further when he suggested that authority in the

classroom should be shared, that there should be a feeling of equity between teacher and students:

If I feel that that teacher is looking down at me, you know, I automatically feel less than and, you know, I want a relationship that's different. I want a respectful rapport with that person and I want to feel like there's a mutual respect. I want to feel like there's equity in that relationship.

Later he had this to add, “You know, I don't want people to think of me as the boss. I'm a co-worker. And I want students to feel the same way. I don't want to look like I'm the boss. I want us to all be, you know, on par with one another.” Bev reinforced Zeke's comments when she said, “Learner-centeredness is just how that eye contact is so important. And how everybody is equal, you know?”

Calvin also expressed a belief in minimizing the inequitable power structure inherent in many classrooms. In doing so, he mentioned idea of the teacher as guide:

If you've got this power relationship, like, “I'm your teacher. I'm up here. You're the student.” I mean, they're all adults too, so I tell the class that I would like them to consider me as their guide. Like, I'm the guide. I'm guiding their education process. I'm the student's guide through the curriculum and I have to pull things out of them and ask them, “What do you think? What are your ideas?”

The concept of teacher as guide is a common thread in the literature on learner-centered education. Essential components of creating a healthy teacher and student relationship include making the most out of teacher and student interactions, treating students fairly and with respect, building rapport, sharing power, and the teacher

assuming the role of guide with the expectation that teachers have just as much to learn from the process as do students.

Psychological environment.

The psychological environment in the classroom was addressed in several ways. Key to this concept is an underlying belief in students' potential. Diane had this to say:

Okay, first of all I think they have to believe that the students are capable of learning. Regardless of their background, or disability, that they all have the potential to learn.

Zeke talked about making the classroom a "positive environment" and emphasized the importance of the teacher having a "positive attitude". Dana further stated the importance of creating a safe environment where students are valued:

And just creating, as I mentioned before, a safe environment for them. Letting them know that their thoughts and opinions matter. That they are important.

In addition to having teachers believe in students and creating a positive environment where students feel valued and safe, another component to a healthy psychological environment was 'fun'. Bev summed up the concept of creating a positive environment where students are free to learn. She said, "A way to explain it is a safe and fun place to learn with respect for everyone. That kinda covers... it all."

Adapting to students' needs.

Finally, the participants in my study indicated that learner-centered teachers need to be able to adapt to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms. Calvin began his response to this question by comparing the role of teacher to that of parent:

So a good parent, like a good teacher, has to know what to give their students and when. You've got to have different ways of teaching, not just one way. You've got to be able to adapt. And you can't just teach your one style. It's not like a factory where you just teach the same thing in the same way over and over and over and think of it like a job and just collect your paycheck. You can't do it like that and say, "Oh this is good enough. That's good enough." That's not going to be successful. Where's the compassion?

Diane continued by saying that "Everyone has different needs, motivations, goals, and objectives." Bev offered that sometimes students "need it again and again but they need it in different ways." Diane echoed this sentiment when she said, "Use all of your skills. Try to think of alternative methods to make the point." She went on to say that students may need different approaches to teaching in order to accommodate a preferred learning style:

Everyone has a different learning style. Everyone learns in a different way. Some are visual, some are auditory, and some have to write things down to understand it. You have to have that kind of belief.

When I asked her to explain how she has the ability to recognize differences in students' needs, Diane had this to say:

I've got this curriculum that's ready to teach, but I also have this ability inside myself to notice when a student is struggling and to be ready to be there with some solution to provide them with help. It's almost like I have this black box inside and when I see an unusual facial expression or some other clue that the student's not comprehending, I've got to have that. I mean, a teacher without that

ability, if they have no black box, and they just stand up front and teach and lecture, and students just sit there, and then the teacher leaves the classroom, I feel like they're not going to be effective as a teacher.

The participants' descriptions of the concept of learner-centeredness shared many of the same ideas found in the previous section where they offered their various definitions of learner-centeredness. These similarities included the fact that teachers must adapt to the unique needs of their students and their various learning styles. Teachers take on the role of guide with responsibility for learning being shared more equitably with students. In addition, along with this shared responsibility for learning should come greater latitude and authority for decision making on the part of the students.

In summary, the data reflect that participants had more of a challenge in attempting to formulate a definition for the concept of learner-centeredness but, consistent with the literature on learner-centered education, they were more forthcoming with descriptions of learner-centeredness. In the next section, I will address research question two.

Themes from Research Question Two

Research question two was designed to determine where the participants believed learner-centeredness comes from. I was curious to find out if they felt like it was something inherent to them as individuals or if it was a learned behavior. If it was learned, I was curious to find out where they had learned to be learner-centered. Some of their responses were expected and some of them were not. Research question two contains five themes. These are; 1) preparation as a teacher, 2) experiences as a learner, 3) institution specific influences, 4) discipline specific influences, and 5) intrinsic

influences. In this section, I will present each of the five themes that I encounter as the participants provide their understanding of where their learner-centeredness comes from.

Preparation as a teacher.

This was an interesting category to examine because many college and university professors, while considered experts in their field, lack any formal preparation as educators. The participants in this study did discuss examples of their preparation as teachers that contributed to their learner-centered behaviors. While not all of their responses directly mention learner-centeredness, all of their responses stemmed from the question “Where does learner-centeredness come from?” Their responses centered around two sub-themes.

The first sub-theme is formal coursework. Several participants mentioned college courses that had helped them prepare for the teaching task as contributing to their learner-centered behaviors in the classroom. The second sub-theme was professional development and self-study. There were numerous examples cited by participants who had actively developed their own learner-centered knowledge through professional development activities or by engaging in self-study. These influences from formal coursework and professional development or self-study will be addressed in this section.

Formal coursework.

One of the consistent threads in this theme was that the participants may have been exposed to a learner-centered approach to education but may have only been partially aware of a term for what they were experiencing. More than one participant shared a similar type of account, which equates to being presented with learner-centered strategies but not realizing there was a specific term for what they were learning.

Joshua explained he was not aware that what he was observing was learner-centered teaching but he described many learner-centered behaviors from his professors in graduate school. He has this to say:

No they didn't teach about learner-centeredness. But I did see teachers there that were focused on all of us. They made it humorous. They taught with excellent materials. They used power point presentations. It was visual. They gave us examples. And their goal was for each individual student to understand. They didn't focus on just one individual student. They would ask everybody in the group. They would make sure everyone participated. Everything was very clear.

Even though Joshua left this experience without assigning the term learner-centered to what was being modeled at Coastal University, he shared many characteristics used to describe learner-centeredness in the literature. For example, he mentioned the fact that the faculty members used humor in the classroom and focused on individual students. He also talked about their materials, saying that they were visual and points were supported by examples. Joshua continued his discussion of Coastal University and talked about how beneficial his coursework was because they appealed to his learning style:

You know Deaf culture depends a lot on examples. We wanna see an example. We wanna see what something looks like. And Coastal University was very visual, they did show lots of examples and activities and it was very clear. I felt like I benefitted a lot from those teachers there. That really helped me a lot. Because there was action involved, it wasn't so much just talking.

Later on, when he was reflecting on his overall experiences at Coastal University, Joshua expressed the fact that his teaching had been changed by what he was learning as

a student in graduate school. “When I came back and was teaching again, I saw a difference. And I understood more how students felt. I think that has really helped me be a better teacher with my students.”

Zeke recounted similar experiences with his coursework at Coastal University with the exception that he seemed to attach the term learner-centered to what he was experiencing. He said:

I didn't even know what learner-centeredness meant. And then I got to Coastal University and we talked about that terminology. And to now see that those behaviors apply to that term. In terms of learner-centeredness really, we would talk about different theories that were out there, different theories about education. And we would talk about one theory, specifically, that was intuitive and activity based. It was learner-centeredness.

So Zeke came away from his time at Coastal University with some specific awareness of learner-centered teaching and how it might be done in the classroom. He went on to say:

We were very much involved in the process. And so it was a learner-centered environment as the semesters went by. As we took all of the classes, and you know, they listened to our ideas and our opinions. They respected what we had to say and really they never told us, you know, this is my way or the highway. That was never what was said. It was always why or why not, and building on principles and ideas.

So far, we see from both Joshua and Zeke an exposure to learner-centered principles that had some influence on their teaching. Coincidentally both of these participants attended the same program at Coastal University and both of them described

similar perceptions of their experiences there and the positive impact this had on their teaching. Interesting to note however is that only Zeke seemed to have attached the term learner-centered to the concepts he had learned at Coastal University.

Other participants in the study talked about post-secondary experiences that prepared them for their teaching positions. Alicia mentioned courses taken at Central University where some of the mechanics of teaching like, curriculum development and using lesson plans were addressed. She had this to say:

I took one class that taught, in part, how to write curriculum and also how to write lesson plans. Yeah, how to make classes engaging: bring your visual aids, be sure you know the subject and that you can talk about it without having to refer back to your book, make sure that you have a plan for each class and that you stick to an agenda.

While most of her comment involved the nuts and bolts of what teachers must do, she did mention “how to make classes engaging”, which is a characteristic of learner-centered teaching commonly found in the literature. Alicia’s colleague Dana is also a Central University graduate. She recalled specific coursework from her years as an undergraduate that instilled in her, skills consistent with a learner-centered perspective. Specifically she talks about her degree in communication studies helping to develop her interpersonal skills. These skills were put to good use when she served as a mentor to new employees at one of her places of employment. Dana consistently received feedback from supervisors that the mentees she worked with reported having positive experiences citing her encouragement and support, both characteristics of learner-centered teaching.

Bev talked about some of her graduate work at State University related to adult education and working with adult learners. She had this to say:

I took two classes on adult education. One was how adults learn and the other one was on best practices for teaching adults. So I got to take six hours at the graduate level. The biggest draw was that all my prior training had been K-12 but now I was learning how things affect adult learners.

In reviewing the literature for my study, there were many instances where adult learning theory and learner-centered practices overlapped. Bev associated her experiences with adult education at State University with some of her learner-centered practices in the classroom.

Diane was the only participant who discussed post-secondary coursework preparing her for teaching without mentioning any exposure to learner-centered principles. She talked about course work from both her undergraduate and graduate studies that supported her in her current faculty role. Diane shared:

I took a couple of courses in graduate school. Or there might have been a general education course at Eastern University, Principles of Teaching. And then in graduate school I took a couple of courses. I don't remember exactly.

In summary, most of the participants in the study were able to address the role that formal coursework had played in their development as educators. Some of them were explicitly aware that what they were being taught were principles directly associated with learner-centered teaching. Others did not associate the term learner-centered to what they had learned and were now modeling in their classrooms. In the next section, I will look at

instances where the participants in my study discussed the role that professional development and self-study had in influencing their teaching practices.

Professional development or self-study.

When asked about where learner-centered behaviors come from, several participants mentioned taking the initiative to improve their teaching by attending professional development or using a variety of resources for self-study.

Calvin talked about attending conferences and reading current research in order to learn about trends in education as well as a way of becoming re-energized for the task of teaching. He put it this way:

Well, maybe through statewide conferences, you go get refreshed or updated on current policies. Like when your tank gets empty you have to go refill. You know, just kind of that professional maintenance kind of stuff. When you get depleted, you go to a workshop and get re-energized. Read research or books about the latest philosophy or what's going on in education. I mean, there's new stuff coming along every three to four years.

While there is no specific mention of developing learner-centered practices here, Calvin did go on to talk about critically reflecting on his teaching, which seems to be aligned with learner-centered behaviors. He has this to say:

You've got to turn your eyes on yourself. So I filmed myself one day and watched it and thought, "Wow, all that stuff I never realized before." So, it's really introspective, you have to look at yourself and look at your teaching skills.

Joshua shared with me a similar story where he talked about attending professional development workshops to improve his classroom performance. He said:

Sometimes I've gone to workshops like mentoring training or ASL immersion. I see the workshops and the presenters there and that gives me some rich experiences that I can share with my students. So sometimes I do take advantage of those experiences and I bring that with me to the classroom to share. I do try to stay updated.

He also talked about self-study as a way to improve his teaching:

And sometimes I look on the Internet to see what's going on and I take some information from that. Or I look at current events, what's going on today. So I do use resources outside of here to help me be a good teacher. But no one single professional or area taught me to be a teacher.

Diane does not specifically address professional development activities but when I asked her about whether or not she engaged in any self-study to improve her learner-centered teaching she had this to say:

Yes, I have periodically. Sometimes I get really busy but when I have the time, I go and look at other methods. How do I improve my teaching? What can I do to be more learner-centered? What strategies can I use? So periodically, I go back and review that information so that I can continue to improve my teaching. I want the program to grow. I want my program to do well. And so I keep trying to improve my teaching.

I think it is worth observing here that Diane believed being learner-centered and focusing on improving her teaching has a direct effect on the well being of the ASL/IT department.

In summary, participants in the study talked about both professional development activities like conferences or workshops as well as different avenues for self-study. While

not all of them tied these functions to a direct improvement in their learner-centered teaching, they did all offer these examples as possible sources for their learner-centered practices. In the next section, I will look at another theme in the data that suggested one possible source for learner-centered behaviors may be the participants' prior experiences as learners in both formal and informal settings.

Experience as a learner.

The second theme I found in research question two involved the prior experiences of the participants as learners. My colleagues in the study had many things to share relating to their experiences in formal education across all grade levels as well as informal learning. The examples cited include both positive and negative experiences, both of which influenced their teaching. The positive experiences contributed to their learner-centered teaching but interesting to note, so did the negative experiences in that my colleagues learned what not to do. I have presented their positive experiences first, followed by their negative experiences.

In this section, I talked about my colleagues' positive experiences in K-12 settings and then moved in to post-secondary experiences. I chose to present the information in this way simply because it seemed like a logical order.

Dana shared with me some of her memories of her years in private school from kindergarten through fifth grade. She described experiences, which are definitely compatible with learner-centeredness. She had this to say:

I think I was a pretty strong student with the basic courses when I was in kindergarten all the way up to fifth grade and I attended a private school, which was a smaller class size, so I had the one on one approach with my teachers. Also

we did a lot of collaborative learning, small group activities and a lot of hands on activities

Here we see examples of clearly learner-centered practices such as the smaller class size, one-on-one approach with teachers, collaborative learning, and hands on activities. As Dana makes the transition into her middle-school years she recalled other examples of learner-centered teaching that she shared with me. She specifically mentions a history teacher:

His approach was parallel to what I had experienced at private school. That one-on-one environment, the collaborative learning, and a lot of group activities, that working in small groups. He encouraged that a lot, and I felt that was the best environment for me to learn in because it reminded me of the grades one through five.

She continued with her comments about this history class and talked about the way that this teacher made learning fun, so fun in fact that students were disappointed when the bell rang and their class was over:

He just made it fun and it wasn't, you know most people look at history and just ugh. You know, memorization and dates and people. Why is it important to me? How is this going to benefit me later in life? Every class day was fun, and he designed all his activities and lessons or lectures around these different group activities that we did. We would play games, but he would incorporate memorization. How can we remember these dates and teaching us how to use mnemonics and that whole concept of drawing pictures and using visuals. That was the one class that I did really well in, and I loved it, and everyone else did.

There was a different vibe in that classroom and when it was over we were always, “ugh the bell rang.” We didn’t want to leave that one class.

Alicia has a similar story recounting her experiences in 7th grade English class.

Alicia emphasized the fact that English was a second language for this teacher who reminded the students that she had overcome the same challenges with English that they were now facing. Alicia had this to say:

I think why she really stuck out to me was she wasn't from this country. She was from Mexico. And she had learned English and she'd really wanted to come to the United States and really, I guess for lack of a better word, really be American. And so she worked really hard to lose her accent. She also gave us no excuses. So, when things were getting hard, you know, she would tell us her story, about "Remember, I didn't grow up in this country. I didn't get all those years of English that you got. And you can do this." Everyday she held us to really high standards and knew we could meet them. She took away all the excuse making so you felt that you needed to rise to that expectation.

Alicia talked about a key concept here that is sometimes used as a criticism of learner-centered education by its detractors, who presume that it requires a lowering of expectations and teachers must *water-down* the curriculum. Instead, this teacher paired high expectations with the encouragement that students are capable of meeting those expectations. Alicia added this about her seventh grade English teacher:

She used to call my house, quite often, I remembered. I used to think I was in trouble because the only time the teachers ever called home was when you were

in trouble. But she didn't just call to, because I was in trouble, but she would call to tell my parents, just my progress. That was it.

Alicia also shared her experiences in a high school Spanish class. Similar to Dana's history teacher, Alicia's Spanish teacher worked hard to make the learning experience fun. She said:

I took Spanish four years in high school and every Friday, my teacher called it the fun day. So he would play the guitar and people took turns singing with him. We would play BINGO in Spanish and everybody would take different turns calling the numbers of the cards.

The concept of making learning a fun and enjoyable experience is common in the literature on learner-centeredness. Next, Diane told her account of a science teacher from high school that had a positive influence on her. He simply took the time to build a relationship with her as his student. She had this to say:

He taught Biology and Science and I had him two different times. But after class, he would always come up to me and talk to me and I felt that he valued me as a person. He thought I was important. And he would come and talk to me and often give me advice or counsel me and say, "You know, you should be going to Eastern Seaboard University. You should go get a good education so you can get a good job." He was like a second father figure to me.

Diane related a similar experience that she had in her math classes in high school. Her teacher exhibited a great deal of patience and dedication. In addition she also encouraged Diane to pursue higher education at Eastern Seaboard University:

Yeah, she was my teacher in Math. And it was my worst subject, but she had so much patience with me and she tried to show me the formulas and how everything worked and she had a lot of patience. After school she was willing to give up her time to tutor me more in depth and spend a lot of time with me. And also gave me advice, encouraged me to go to Eastern Seaboard University to have a better quality of life in the future. I felt like when I graduated, I was ready to go right to college. And if I hadn't had that experience, I might have not gone.

My colleagues also talked about their experiences in post-secondary settings.

There were many examples of exceptional teachers who were able to build relationships with and inspire their students.

Alicia remembered her years at Hill Country University and shared an experience from her anthropology class. She specifically addressed her teacher's ability to engage the students through her passion for the subject matter. She had this to say:

I think another teacher that really was a strong impact and influence was, in college, my professor in anthropology. She was proud of the fact that she was Latina. She knew about her culture. She talked about it. She could make people excited about it. And just really understood all the things that went with that. She would pull people in to want to talk about it, to want to learn about that. So when I took her classes, they were always really exciting.

I asked Alicia just what was it about this teacher, besides her passion for her subject, that made the classes memorable. This was her response:

When she sat in class with us, most teachers would sit or stand up at a podium and teach. She was the only other teacher I knew that would ask us to sit in a circle

and she would sit in a circle with us. And have conversations and talk about different things. It makes us understand that we are part of the dynamic and it's not somebody just taking full control of that lecture, but inviting us into that. And when she did stand, because she didn't always sit in a circle with us, but when she was teaching, she was also the one that never stood up on the platform or the stage in the classroom. She always stood below that. And so she was very interactive with us. I think she was really learner-centered in that whole engagement of "you're always a part of this dynamic".

Zeke shared with me his perspective on learning from encounters with his professors. Eventually he told me about specific teachers who influenced him because of specific behaviors they demonstrated or characteristics they had. In the beginning however, he talked about gleaning from examples of learner-centered teaching in generic terms. He offered the following statements:

You know, I see other teachers and I learn from them. I get ideas about what I would like. I've sat in on classes with other teachers and I borrow ideas from them; things that I think were effective. And I'm always willing to change for the better. If I'm doing something wrong, I want to know so I can make those changes.

I asked him just what specifically motivated him to be a learner-centered practitioner and he began to tell me about the kind of impact he wants to have on his students. He elaborated by saying:

I want the students to have the best experience. I want those students to learn the most; and to have fun and enjoy it, as I've said before. You know, when they go

out of the classroom, I want them to feel positive about me and about themselves. And about what they learned.

Here, Zeke talked about the importance of having fun experiences while learning. The sense of enjoyment is important. In addition he talked about the feelings he would like students to leave the classroom with. Specifically they should feel positive about the experience.

Bev shared with me her memory of a particular psychology teacher. Because this was her minor, Bev had the opportunity to take more than one class from this same teacher. She addressed the characteristics that she found so appealing about her professor's approach:

I took every class this teacher taught. She was just fun. Talk about a comfortable environment, you never felt like a question was stupid. She was very witty. She had a lot of energy. You could tell she just liked to teach.

Diane shared with me her story about a particular professor at Eastern Seaboard University who inspired her. Again, the recurring theme of feeling valued by their professor or feeling like they were important was present. Diane described her professor by saying:

She spent time with me to visit with me. I felt like she valued me, she thought I was important as a person and she paid attention to me as a student. She taught Women's Studies and she had me be introspective with myself and to learn about myself. And she also gave me a lot of support. I took lots of inspiration from that teacher.

As Joshua formulates his response to my question about his past educational experiences, he becomes visibly energized. He started with a discussion about an experience at Eastern Seaboard University with two professors of art history:

I was required to take art history. And I had two different teachers, and both of these teachers were like the best teachers I have ever had because they were very motivated. They were active in the classroom. They moved around a lot. They explained a lot of things, and um, finally that was how I was able to take my style of teaching from the two of them. I wanted to teach like that.

He followed these comments with the statement that “so many students paid attention in their classes”. He adds:

If it was a dull lecture, with not such a great signer, the students would tend to fall asleep or get bored, but not in art history, everyone paid attention. And I got really good grades because obviously they were a good teacher and I was interested.

When I asked him to elaborate on just what it was about these teachers that kept his attention he said that it was like watching them perform a dance. He added that they were engaging and joyful:

They were very, um, engaging. They were joyful in their teaching. They moved around. It was almost like watching a ballet. They moved around the room with gracefulness and ease. And I felt like, you know, they were teaching in a way that everyone was paying attention.

Finally, he talked about their ability to motivate their students and that he intentionally modeled his teaching after these two examples from his experiences at Eastern Seaboard University. He concluded his response by saying:

Those art history teachers were amazing. And I think that's an important thing that they need to motivate the students to learn. That's key. And they gave their time for their students. I want to be like that. So when I was asked to teach, I wanted to be like those two women. And I think I've been successful with my students.

Art history was not the only example Joshua talked about. He also mentioned a professor who taught visual gestural communication, (VGC). This is how he described his VGC teacher, “He taught with so much energy. You know, thinking about it, I should add him to that list. He was another really good teacher along with those art history teachers.”

Like Joshua, Zeke also talked about an amazing art history teacher at Eastern Seaboard University. His memory of this professor was remarkably like Joshua’s account.

There was one great example I can think of, an Art History teacher. I'd heard lots of great things about that teacher. And that teacher was very, dramatic in the classroom, very theatrical. And I felt straight away, that's the kind of teacher that I want to be. It was a very popular class, and we were all fascinated by him the entire time. Everyone felt involved, and he would always ask students questions, and pull information from us, and illicit responses from us. It was very interactive. Very exciting and it was a very inspiring environment for us. He made it fun. The classroom was a very enjoyable experience that semester and I learned a lot.

In addition to speaking about their experiences in formal education, both K-12 and post-secondary, the participants shared with me several examples of informal learning where they encountered individuals who influenced their learner-centered teaching. Some of these influences came from family members but there were other significant experiences, which were learner-centered, where non-family members were involved.

Calvin talked about some of the early influences in his life that continue to shape his teaching today. He also shared that he was exposed to various learning preferences from his role models:

I've learned from a lot of different speakers; from my parents, from the way they taught me, from the way they explained things. You know, my mom likes manipulatives. She likes to have props to explain stuff. Not so much my dad. And she would do everything with props and manipulatives. Or she would draw a bar chart. My father never did any of that; it was all in his head. He had a very different approach. But I used both of their methods as a teacher.

Zeke shared similar experiences with a similar outcome. He described modeling his teaching after positive influences like his father as well as other individuals. He said:

I've learned a lot from my father and I now replicate that myself. I learned learner-centeredness from seeing it. From seeing people that other people looked up to and where they got their ideas from and I would see something I liked and would like to replicate that myself. I liked someone's attitude. I like another person's idea, their creativity. All of those things I've internalized, and I now replicate them.

Another one of my colleagues shared with me her experiences growing up in the Catholic Church. Alicia began teaching religious education classes when she was still a teenager. Her parents primarily influenced her but there were also other role models during this period of her life after which she patterned her teaching:

Well, I have to tell you, my parents had been teachers for Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) for a long time. When I said that I wanted to teach CCD, my mom says, “Well, this year, you come with me and your dad and you can watch us teach.” And so basically I had like, you know, student teaching kind of, under my parents.

After her initial experiences with her parents and CCD education, Alicia began working with her youth group at church. Here she was able to hone her teaching skills:

When I started teaching the youth group, um, there was a deacon that was always assigned to the youth group and he was not only their spiritual leader, but he had his Master’s in Education. Part of each week was set aside to meet with him to see if the topics were appropriate for teenagers and often times he would give us help in terms of, “Don’t forget to add this,” or “I think this is a little bit too mature,” or “What’s going to be your activity that goes along with this?” and so, he helped a lot.

Alicia’s parents as well as other leaders in her church helped introduce her to teaching where she began to acquire the skills she needed to function effectively in her role as a faculty member at San Antonio College.

In summary, the participants in my study shared with me many examples of their experiences with models of effective teaching. These experiences occurred both in formal

education settings and in informal settings where some of their influences came from family members. The participants in the study were compelled to share these accounts with me because each encounter played some role in shaping their teaching today. While not all of the examples included explicit references to learner-centeredness, there were many behaviors described which align with learner-centered principles.

In the next section, I discuss my colleagues' encounters with learning experiences that they felt represented ineffective teaching. These experiences served as an example of what not to do in order to be a learner-centered educator. There were accounts from K-12 as well as post-secondary. They are presented in that order.

I began interview two with Joshua just like all the other interview sessions. I was looking forward to his responses because he told me in advance that he had something particularly meaningful to share with me. As he began his story, I listened with anticipation. I was not expecting the turn his account would take. I barely knew how to respond as he shared:

Okay, when I was in elementary school, there was one teacher who had all of us, the students, sitting around a table and she was showing us pictures of a fireman and a lawyer and a doctor and a nurse and a teacher. And so the teacher asked us, "Now which one of these do you want to be when you grow up?" And everyone answered, "I wanna be this. I wanna be that." I picked lawyer because I thought they made lots of money. And then when we were done, the teacher said, "You can't become any of these because you are Deaf and all of these people have to be hearing people." And that was such a deflating moment. Why did she even tell us about this in the first place? Right away I was just defeated. And I thought, "Well,

my uncle is deaf. And he works for Southwestern Bell in Arkansas. He's very smart. So I can have a job like that. Why did she tell me no?" But obviously I was feeling like she was wrong and I wanted to prove her wrong and somehow, as I went through school, and as I was growing up, I realized I just hated school.

When Joshua finished his story, it was a minute or two before I was able to regroup and continue with the interview. I just could not imagine anyone doing this to a group of elementary school children. In spite of this inauspicious beginning in formal education, Joshua, the only Deaf member of his family, is also the only one to have attended college, earning both a BA and MA degrees. I am thankful that Joshua did not become a casualty of his elementary school experience. It makes me think teachers should take our own version of the Hippocratic Oath promising at the very least to "do no harm".

Alicia began by talking about the contrast between the experiences she had in the lower grades when compared to her high school years. In her case, elementary and even junior high school seemed to be more learner-centered. Things began to change for Alicia as she progressed into high school. She offered:

When I got to high school that's when I started to see differences in my teachers and so some teachers, especially like History, and Science, um, that was mostly just lecture. And we as the students took notes.

Dana shared with me her early experiences in sixth grade math classes. I momentarily flashed back to my own unpleasant experiences in middle-school math class. As she continued with her account, I recognized many similarities to my own story. In describing her experiences with the math teacher, Dana had this to say:

Her style too was just very rigid and there was nothing appealing about her class at all. So it probably was the dreading of having to do math, but also just her style that I didn't care for when I have other teachers, especially in sixth grade who weren't like that. She wasn't very encouraging, but she was just strict. I didn't like the way that she managed her classroom at all. And it was sort of, looking back on it, there wasn't a lot of help. Just, it was clear as day, written in red, that she would write in, that I failed. And I think that she couldn't have used more red ink, but she just never said, "Why don't you see me after class?" or, "Maybe you can go to a tutoring session that's available in the basement." I didn't hear those suggestions from her. I got them from other teachers, but not her.

As I listened to Dana's account, I realized there were many similarities between our stories as we both struggled with the subject of math and teachers who were less than learner-centered.

Another common thread found in the stories that Dana and I shared is that we both struggled to unlearn the perception of ourselves as poor students who just were not cut out to be academically successful. This process of unlearning took many years for each of us.

Diane told me about a particularly non learner-centered experience from her years in high school. She described a teacher who was not interested in engaging her students: She would teach briefly, I think it was maybe a Social Studies class. She would do a very short lecture and then she would sit down and maybe file her nails. And my question was, what am I supposed to do now. Do we just play games? Or do we talk to each other? What do we do? And I feel she was not the least bit learner-

centered at all. She didn't ask our opinion, she didn't make us think, she didn't engage with us.

I think Dana said it best when she described an experience in high school history class. When she talked about this experience, you could feel her mood shift. It was like she was reliving those early, unpleasant memories. She said:

It wasn't fun anymore. And so I didn't fail it, but I wasn't earning that A. I wasn't motivated to learn and it was just; I have to go do this class again, her class, and decide if I wanted to take notes or not. Most of the time I didn't, I just sat there.

This section included comments from the participants in my study describing their less than learner-centered experiences in K-12 settings. Their accounts ranged from Joshua's painful story to other experiences of teachers who only lectured, were too rigid, or simply were discouraging or lacked the ability to engage with or motivate their students. The common thread in all of their accounts was that each one of them learned that this is not the way they wanted to approach their jobs as teachers. In the next section, I have addressed similar accounts from my colleagues' negative experiences in post-secondary settings.

Zeke shared with me his experiences with a few of his professors at Coastal University. He described their classes as torturous:

I know I have experienced several teachers when I was in college and through Coastal University that I would see and I was really flabbergasted to just watch them. They just lectured and it was just torture to get through the semester with them and it didn't challenge my learning abilities at all. So when I'm a teacher, I want to motivate my students. I want to raise their expectations, I want mutual

respect between us, I want a very interactive relationship with my students and I think that is more learner-centered rather than the students just looking at me while I lecture.

Diane talked about a psychology class where the instructor used no facial expression. A lecture in ASL without using facial expression is equivalent to a spoken lecture that is completely lifeless and monotone. She had this to say:

There was one teacher that just signed and had no facial expression in Psychology. I mean, their face was just deadpan. And I would catch myself nodding off going to sleep in there because their face was so deadpan.

In addressing the second theme in research question two, experience as a learner, the participants in my study had much to share. They cited examples of both formal and informal learning. The experiences with formal learning were across the grade levels K-12 and throughout post-secondary education and beyond. They also offered examples of both positive and negative experiences. The positive experiences often shared a common thread in making learning fun and in the importance of the relationship between student and teacher. Faculty members who showed that they valued their students left a positive impression.

Likewise non-learner-centered faculty left their mark as well, but unfortunately the impressions were a negative ones. These negative experiences were included here because they too contributed to the participants' current practices as faculty members. The next section will address issues related to San Antonio College's effort to foster an environment of learner-centered instruction.

Institution specific influences.

San Antonio College, as part of the institutional focus, encourages the use of learner-centered principles campus wide. In 2003, as part of the college's re-accreditation cycle with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, (SACS) the college created the Murguia Learning Institute, (MLI) named for Raul Murguia, a respected educator at SAC for many years. One of the goals of the MLI is to help orient newly hired faculty into the culture at SAC. This includes instilling in them the value of learner-centered education for its impact on student engagement and retention.

The MLI orientation for newly hired faculty occurs each fall semester. The services provided by the MLI are also available for departments on campus that voluntarily request assistance or for departments where performance measures seem to suggest some assistance from the MLI is warranted. During the years since its inception, the scope of the MLI has expanded to include general faculty and staff development in addition to supporting a climate where learner-centered education is fostered.

The learner-centered principles encouraged by the MLI mesh nicely with the district-wide emphasis on learning outcomes and accountability. Stating it more simply, the administration at SAC considers learner-centered teaching instrumental in achieving some of the district's goals for improving performance measures.

Some of the participants in my study were hired after the creation of the MLI and had the opportunity to attend weekly sessions of three hours each for their first semester of employment at SAC. Additionally, the ASL/IT department requested that the faculty and staff responsible for the MLI offer their services specifically for our department during the fall semester of 2009.

These experiences with the MLI meant that the participants in my study might have had more awareness of the college's initiative to promote a learner-centered campus environment than their colleagues on campus who had not participated in the MLI. Their responses in this section came from a line of questioning designed to understand the participants' beliefs about the MLI and the college's concerted effort at fostering a learner-centered environment at SAC.

The participants' responses addressed general areas including the reasons for creating the MLI and the benefits from the MLI training. They also talked about the unique nature of community colleges and how faculty and staff as well as the student population can benefit from learner-centered practices.

Bev began her response by talking about why the college created the MLI and the reason for their interest in learner-centered education. "I think the college as a whole is doing it for retention and for a positive effect on students, you know, to keep them. To get them here and to keep them here." She addresses the concept of retention as a motivating factor behind the MLI. Dana's comments continue in this vein as she talks about how the MLI is designed to support and encourage students as they work to reach their goals. She had this to say:

That was probably, the main thing that I learned from that MLI when I saw the college trying to do, again, not only encouraging the students, but showing them that we are that support system for them to get them through this college experience and so they can transition into a four year institution or immediately start working in their field.

Even though she did not use the specific terminology that Bev used, it is clear that both participants are talking about the concepts of student retention and success. Dana also added that the MLI can be considered an investment in the students. She said:

I know that I hear the college always stating that they want to have this approach and it's just always trying to meet the student's needs and to work with them and to really offer that helping hand, like investing a lot of time into them. And I think that with MLI, the requirement for faculty members to go through that, I think that it allows instructors to get a better understanding maybe how to accommodate the students because we learn tips through MLI.

Alicia spoke a bit more specifically about her experiences with the MLI and the benefit she gained from her experiences there. In addition, she made the connection between the work of the MLI, learner-centered instruction, and principles of adult learning. She said:

I think when it comes to being learner-centered whether it comes natural or doesn't come natural, I think the training is really important because even though I could be learner-centered, if I don't even know how to define that in my own classroom, I didn't even know that I was being learner-centered. And by just learning other techniques, I think that allows me to become even more cognizant that this is a good tool because this allows the adult learner to be more successful.

Diane shared Alicia's sentiment when she also mentioned the importance of having a term to describe what she was already doing, something she acquired from the MLI. She had this to offer:

Before that, I was practicing learner-centered behavior; I just didn't know the word. But then when she came and I learned the terminology, I went to the Internet and did more research and then started applying that to my teaching. And I realized I've been doing some of those things all along, I just didn't have a word for it.

Dana mentioned her belief that community colleges are especially well suited to adopting learner-centered principles. Her reasons included a general willingness for faculty members in community colleges to accommodate varying needs of students perhaps made possible because of a smaller class size. Dana contrasted her experiences in a community college setting with her university experience. She had this to say:

I think that the climate here on a community college campus is very different than the university campus. And I'm just drawing from my experience but, um, I think that here the community college instructors accommodate the students more so than a university instructor. And I'm just drawing from my experience but I would definitely tell a new faculty member that having an open-door policy could really benefit the students.

To Dana, part of the reason for having an open-door policy was to foster a more significant relationship between students and teachers. In addition, Dana also commented on an advantage of having smaller class sizes. She went on to say:

The classroom numbers typically are smaller in the community college. I know there are class sizes at the university level that may seem small but in the community college, some classes are working with just six students as opposed to

maybe a small class size in a university would be 45 students in the classroom.

So, I find that yeah there is a difference.

When I asked the participants in my study to talk about some of the specific things they learned from their involvement with the MLI Alicia had this to offer:

We learned some techniques how to make our classes more learner-centered and we were given some ideas on how to make the adult learners feel safe in a classroom environment. We learned some techniques that would support that adult learner, such as writing down agendas on the board so that the student had an expectation what would come next and they felt more prepared and more in control and therefore creating a safer learning environment.

I think it is important to note here that Alicia talked about the importance of creating an environment where adult learners can feel safe. Her colleagues also discussed some of the more practical skills that they acquired from their experiences with the MLI. Joshua had this to say:

They taught us how to build relationships correctly, how to treat everyone as individuals, how to help them all work on their goals, on their goals for the future, how to help them build on their weaknesses and make those into strengths, and help make their strengths even stronger.

The concept of relationship building is a foundational construct in learner-centered instruction. Joshua mentioned the idea of relationship and the role this played in his efforts in the classroom. He specifically talked about recognizing his students as individuals and helping each of them work on achieving their goals by building on the strengths that each of them already has. This is another concept, which is key to learner-

centeredness. Another of my colleagues, Calvin, also addressed the idea of relationship building, a strategy he acquired through the MLI. Calvin added:

All the different techniques that were demonstrated at MLI; um, using more technology, standing in front of class and welcoming every student as they come in and say, “Hey, welcome to class! Glad you're here!” and you know, shaking their hands or whatever. You just never know, one little thing could have a positive impact and make a great first impression and change a student's opinion.

Finally, Diane shared that she felt like she missed out on something by not having the MLI experience as a newly hired faculty member years ago and appreciated having the department experience the MLI in 2009. She adds,

I felt like there were some things that I could benefit from, some things that I didn't know before. Because when I was a new teacher, we didn't have that kind of orientation. Today, all new faculty members get to go through that orientation, but we didn't do that in the past. I know when we talked about learning outcomes, that was very interesting and I was learning how to apply that to my work.

In this section, the participants in my study talked about a specific, institution-sanctioned influence that contributes to their awareness of and incorporation of learner-centered practices in their teaching. The MLI was established in an attempt to improve student engagement and retention at San Antonio College. My colleagues addressed the work of the MLI and specifically mentioned key concepts aligned with learner-centered principles such as; relationship building, accommodating students, and creating a safe environment for adult learners. In the next section I have addressed the next theme I

uncovered in research question two and talk about specific characteristics of ASL, Deaf culture, and ASL instruction which may lead to learner-centered behaviors.

Discipline specific influences.

The fourth theme that I found in research question two had to do with the unique nature of ASL, Deaf culture, and the ASL/IT department at SAC, which might contribute to or influence faculty members' use of learner-centered behaviors. Some of the comments were practical such as, ASL is a visual language therefore we must have eye contact or some form of engagement before communication can begin. Others were less readily discernable and touched on unique mores of Deaf culture specifically and collectivist cultures in general. I began with the more explicit examples and work into some of those less obvious.

Several participants in my study addressed the concept that ASL is a visual language that requires interlocutors to have eye contact with each other before communication can occur. This fosters a relationship between students and teachers as well as among students.

Diane began by saying, "I like the way the tables are arranged. Everyone's sitting where they can see each other." Bev shared a similar sentiment. "If you're not looking at someone you're not talking to them. The class is set up so everybody can see everybody." Their colleague Calvin agreed with both Diane and Bev when he said:

Everybody's not sitting in rows; we all sit in a U shape so everybody can see each other. I think my classroom structure is very learner-centered. We can all see each other really well.

Bev added:

I think our classes are unique in that everybody sees everybody. It's not Psychology or Government, where you just, maybe you know the person beside you, but maybe not. And you can't just sit back. You have to participate. I don't think in any other class, you can manage to sit back and not, I think English, Math, all those other classes, you can make an A in the class and never open your mouth or talk to the teacher. And I think in our discipline, you have to.

Here, Bev was addressing the concept of ASL as a visual language requiring eye contact in order for communication to happen but also the expectation within the ASL/IT department that students must engage with the curriculum, the faculty member, and each other. Alicia supported this idea and contrasted learner-centered classrooms with those that are teacher-centered when she said:

And because of the mode of the language, you have to have eye contact for the language to work. You can't be removed like we typically are in a teacher-centered classroom where you lecture and I take notes.

Zeke also addressed something unique he had observed within the department of ASL/IT. He talked about valuing students and including them in the process of their education. He said:

Oh, I've seen that interaction, that level of involvement that we've talked about. The planting of the seed with the student and let them grow the seed themselves. I see that with the counseling. Their making suggestions, rather than the telling. It's very involved and very interactive. I see, um, you know, that the students are valued. I see that they feel involved in the process.

For Alicia, the difference in the ASL/IT department was more straightforward. It started simply with a recommendation from her mother who said, “Just take one class a semester that’s gonna be fun for you” and ASL was her fun class. Alicia went on to explain why ASL courses at SAC were different experiences than her other courses. She said:

I would have to say, for a lot of my classes it seemed, my first two years of school it was just a lot of lecture, and we took notes. That was it. And then I came into the sign language department and that’s where things started to change.

I asked Alicia to elaborate on some of these differences that she observed. She began to describe how students were encouraged to spend time in the department. This was her response:

The sign language department’s student lab was different from any other lab that I had been to because in the sign language department, their lab, you can talk to other students, and stay and kind of hang out. In other labs, you went in, you had your set appointment, you would meet with your tutor, and when your time was up, you really needed to leave.

Alicia also introduced a concept that could lead to a stronger relationship between students and teachers. This was a characteristic of courses in the ASL/IT department that was not part of courses in the general curriculum in her experience.

Well, something that I would want to add here in terms of how I was taught, I think something that really makes our department really learner-centered, was that I was taught that this was the first time I could call my teachers by their first name. And that has never happened in any other class that I’ve ever taken in

higher education. And so my teachers taught me that I could still respect them as a teacher and still, do all of this, calling them by their first name.

This was an important concept to note. When I asked Alicia where she thought this comes from she elaborated.

I think, well, kind of knowing Deaf culture now, and you know, seeing that sign names are really based off the other person's first name, that part of that culture is "Well, we'll go by our first names." And it doesn't mean that people respect that person any less, but I think it certainly makes them a heck of a lot more approachable on the onset because you call them by their first name.

This was important because Alicia was proposing a cultural difference representative of Deaf culture that, by default, puts individuals on a first-name basis. To her, this created an environment where she felt like her professors were more approachable. Some of her colleagues in my study also addressed other unique characteristics of Deaf culture that might contribute to a learner-centered environment. Joshua talked about the necessity to appeal to a variety of learning styles. From his experiences, Deaf culture accommodates the type of learner who likes to have concrete examples. He said, "Deaf culture depends a lot on examples. We wanna see an example. We wanna see what something looks like."

Diane addressed a different aspect, the idea that Deaf culture is a collectivist culture and emphasizes relationships as essential to building rapport:

We talked about rapport, how important rapport is. That's certainly a part of Deaf culture; that eye contact. You can't have a disconnect. You know, you've got to have that intimacy kind of relationship. I think there is a connection between

learner-centeredness and culture because you've got to have that rapport, you've got to have that connection to somebody. It's a collectivist culture, not an individualist culture.

I found this theme to be particularly interesting because it suggested the possibility that there are practical considerations of ASL as a visual language as well as cultural implications that might contribute to learner-centered behaviors.

The participants in my study talked about how ASL, because it is a visual language, requires that individuals establish eye contact in order to communicate. Several participants suggested that this helps to build relationships and establish a type of rapport. The participants also mentioned how certain aspects of Deaf culture might also contribute to faculty members in the department of ASL/IT having a predisposition to learner-centered behaviors.

In the final section from research question two I discussed the concept of intrinsic influences that faculty members believe may contribute to their learner-centered teaching.

Intrinsic influences.

The fifth theme from research question two involved the premise that learner-centeredness is a quality that teachers are born with. More than one participant in my study shared this belief. For each of them, these comments were an attempt to explain the source of their learner-centered beliefs. In each case, the participants began by saying that they were not sure where they acquired their learner-centeredness but that perhaps it was something they already possessed. Zeke said it simply when he said, "it's also an intuitive thing." Many of them also stated that they believed that learner-centeredness could be

further refined or developed with education and practice but the predisposition to being learner-centered was intrinsic to their very being.

Dana began by talking about her family and the fact that many of her family members are teachers. This is what she had to say:

I was talking to my mother about it, and she said, “Look at your surroundings and your family. You come from a long line of teachers and I think that it’s just in your blood or you have that skill, that interpersonal skill to really be effective, maybe working with students and encouraging them and being there as a mentor.”

When Dana recounts her mother’s comment “I think that it’s just in your blood” we get the idea that learner-centeredness is something that is part of who she is. Dana was not the only participant to share this opinion. Diane shared a similar comment:

I think it's got to be something that you're born with. You might have a lot of skills, you might be able to study and learn lots of things, but it requires lots of skills. It's not just sitting there and teaching and then just leaving the room. It involves so much stuff.

Alicia did not use the exact same wording as Dana about learner-centeredness being in your blood or as Diane who felt it was something you were born with, nonetheless, she talked about learner-centeredness as being something that comes from within. She said:

Some of it I feel is natural. Some of it I feel is not natural. The natural part is, you know, I feel I am that people person. I want to talk to people. So that part comes really naturally in terms of establishing a rapport with them. That is the really natural side of it.

That Alicia believed her learner-centeredness may be partially attributed to her own nature suggested a shared belief with Dana and Diane. Their colleague Calvin seemed to agree with Alicia's idea that learner-centeredness came naturally. Calvin had this to offer:

Some teachers have a natural style. Some people automatically build rapport, and I think other teachers have to work really hard to figure out what their weaknesses are and then maybe years later they're finally gonna become a good teacher.

Calvin believed that at least some learner-centered behaviors can be accounted for "naturally" but he also believed that, with hard work, individuals can become good teachers. This suggested an idea shared by several of his colleagues, that is, learner-centered behaviors may be partially innate, but can also be developed with practice.

Joshua believed that his success as a teacher was partially due to his ability to use his common sense. He had this to say:

Well, you know, sometimes when I'm teaching, I wonder, where did I learn that? Where did that come from? I mean, I know that I'm a good teacher. I'm not trying to be conceited here. But I can see from my students' success, from the student evaluations, from the compliments that I get, that I'm a good teacher. But I always ask myself, how did I become a good teacher? Where did that come from? And I don't know. I think that because I use common sense a lot when I teach. And so, that's part of the job; that's part of the teacher role to use my common sense.

While common sense played a part in Joshua's learner-centered development, Diane attributed at least some of her learner-centered behaviors to instinct. She offered:

I think that's something I came up with instinctively. I've learned to make those adaptations on my own. In my early days here, I don't believe I was learner-centered. I taught right from the book. And for the first two years, I felt, this is not working. This isn't successful. I don't feel any connection to the students. So eventually I adjusted until I became a more learner-centered teacher.

Diane added to her comments about instinct and used terms like “gut” and “trial and error” suggesting some type of experimentation and reflection was involved in her development as a learner-centered educator. This is what she had to say:

And I think I learned that on my own. I just followed my gut, my instinct. I felt through trial and error that doesn't work, let's try something else. And I finally got a to a point where I'm helping the students. My goal is to keep them motivated, to get them engaged, to not be bored, to keep them learning.

Dana shared a similar belief to Diane and talked about her current use of learner-centered behaviors as a result of trial and error:

But it was really trial and error because I wasn't given formal instruction on how to work closely with mentees and how to provide for support or encouragement and feedback that mentors are expected to give.

After some consideration, Dana came to the conclusion that there was both an innate quality to learner-centeredness as well as an ability to learn to incorporate learner-centered behaviors in your teaching. She went on to say:

I think it's some of both. I think the innate part really is more of an influence. I think that's going to have to do with your experiences, so my experiences as a student going through school. It becomes instinctual for me because I think that's

probably a good starting point for my students that will help them learn. But I also think that it can be learned through observation and see other teachers doing that.

Finally, Zeke also talked about the innate nature of learner-centeredness when he said he was not aware that he had it in him. He further explained:

You know, I never knew that I even had that in me, to be honest, until I went to Coastal University and studied for my Master's and then I saw that theory and then I realized that I fit that model.

Along with Zeke, his colleague Dana shared the sentiment that she was learner-centered before she knew there were words to describe what she was doing. This is what she had to offer:

I still didn't know there was a term for this. I recognize it, but I didn't know there was a name until I saw or heard it mentioned it at one of our meetings.

In the final theme that I noted from research question two, participants in my study expressed the belief that learner-centered behaviors were partially innate or intrinsic to who they are as individuals. However, they also believed that an individual could learn to become learner-centered. This paradigm is revisited during the discussion of the findings in the next chapter.

In summary, my analysis of the responses to research question two resulted in five themes. The first theme was preparation as a teacher and involved the participants' formal course work in preparation for their teaching career as well as informal learning from professional development, continuing education, or self-study.

The second theme was the participants' experience as learners. They shared both positive and negative experiences. It was interesting to observe that the participants in my

study believe that both types of experiences had positive influences on their learner-centered teaching. The positive experiences served as examples that the participants wanted to emulate while the negative experiences taught them what not to do to be effective in the classroom.

Theme three was institution specific influences. Here we saw the participants sharing their perceptions of the MLI at SAC and the influences on their learner-centered behaviors.

The fourth theme looked at discipline specific influences that may contribute to learner-centered behaviors. One belief shared by my colleagues was simply the visual nature of ASL and the fact that eye contact is essential to communication and helps to build a connection between speaker and listener. Other influences were believed to come more from specific cultural mores unique to Deaf culture such as the collectivist nature of Deaf culture and the use of ASL name signs, which means that students and teachers are frequently on a first name basis.

Finally, the fifth theme was intrinsic influences that contributed to learner-centered behaviors. Here the participants in my study talked about their belief that learner-centeredness was something they are born with. But they also came to the eventual conclusion, that learner-centered behaviors can be learned as well. In the next section, I have addressed research question three.

Themes from Research Question Three

The purpose of research question three was to determine what the participants believed their learner-centered behaviors looked like in the classroom. I was interested in

finding out just how their beliefs about learner-centeredness manifested themselves in their teaching and their interaction with students.

Research question three contains four themes. These are: 1) teacher/student relationship, 2) psychological environment, 3) teacher behaviors, and 4) teachers as learners. In this section, I have presented each of the four themes I encountered as the participants provided their understanding of what their learner-centered behaviors looked like in the classroom.

Teacher and student relationships.

When looking at the literature on learner-centered education, the relationship between teachers and students is prevalent. It becomes apparent very quickly that this relationship is central to effective learner-centered classrooms. The participants in my study also spoke at length about the importance of the teacher/student relationship. Zeke explained the concept this way:

Well, let's see, when I say relationship, what I mean is...just you know, with my personality, that I like to have a good relationship, a good rapport with my students. I want the students to have a positive attitude in regards to me and how I teach. And I want them to have a positive attitude about themselves.

Several participants talked about this idea of rapport between teacher and student. One of the reasons why rapport is important is because of the need for teachers to adopt a different role in a learner-centered setting. Alicia elaborated on this idea of rapport and teacher role when she said:

I think that there's more interaction with the teacher, much more rapport that has to be developed in that. Teachers will count themselves in as part of that learning process as well and not just be in teacher mode.

This idea of teachers as part of the learning process suggests a different role from the traditional teacher-centered model common in many post-secondary settings. Alicia also suggested that there is a different way to *be* than in *teacher mode*. What she is referring to here when she talks about teacher mode is the more traditional model where the teacher drives what is going on in the classroom. With learner-centered education, teachers take on a different role and share responsibility with students. Zeke talked about his perspective on this shared responsibility:

I never think of myself as the teacher, and you need to pay attention to me. I just don't see myself that way. It's a give and take. I want us all to enjoy class together. I want us to, you know, respect each other.

Here with the concept of “give and take” and mutual respect, Zeke has introduced this idea of shared power in the learner-centered classroom. He went on to say:

I just mean having a good relationship with the student. You know, making sure the student is comfortable with me. That I'm not looking down on the student in any way. Also, I'm letting the student know, I'm here to teach you. If you need resources, you can come to me and I will give you the resources that you need.

It is important to note here how Zeke used the concept of “looking down on the student” to describe an imbalance of power between teacher and student. His colleague Diane also supported the idea of a greater degree of parity between teacher and students in learner-centered classrooms. She added:

Well, it's equal. They have a good relationship. The student feels comfortable talking to the teacher about any question or concerns. Um, it's a good working relationship. We work in tandem together. I think that's a good relationship to have with students.

Here we saw key words that described what this shared responsibility looked like when Diane talked about teachers and students working in tandem. In her explanation, she believed that having a good working relationship with her students also increased the students' comfort level, which allowed them to feel more comfortable asking questions. Diane elaborated on the concept of shared responsibility by saying:

I feel like everyone's on the same plane. I want us to have that shared power. I want us to be on the same level, I want to be down to earth when I'm working with them, you know, this is me this is who I am.

Diane's belief about the concept of classroom equity even influences what she chooses to wear in the classroom. She talked about the idea of dressing less formally in order to appear more accessible to her students.

Zeke attributed his opinions about sharing authority in the classroom to experiences he had as a student that he felt were oppressive. These experiences made him conscious of the imbalance of power and reminded him to take steps to avoid the same situation with his own students. He had this to add:

If I feel that that teacher is looking down at me, you know, I automatically feel less than and, you know, I want a relationship that's different. I want a respectful rapport with that person and I want to feel like there's a mutual respect. I want to feel like there's equity in that relationship.

Zeke's colleague Calvin also talked about the concept of oppression as something that should be avoided in the learner-centered classroom. Calvin had this to say.

And maybe I know a lot about the subject but I don't want to oppress them. If they think I'm holding all this authority over them, it's oppressive. If I look down at them, I'd rather have us be on a level of equality like respect.

Finally, Zeke talked about how sharing power and responsibility in learner-centered classrooms was beneficial to students in many ways. He elaborated by saying, I want to empower the students to be able to learn on their own, to develop their own skills, to develop those leadership skills and that way when they feel empowered, and they feel they can do those things on their own, maybe they can share that with someone else. They can do their work. They can do their part.

There is an important thread that I should emphasize here. None of the beliefs expressed by the participants in my study suggested that building a strong relationship with your students and being willing to share some of the responsibility for learning meant giving the students a *free ride* or watering down the curriculum. These are both common criticisms of learner-centered teaching posed by those who are not entirely familiar with the concept. But even with a more equitable distribution of power, faculty members still believe in having high expectations for their students who are held accountable to meeting this standard. My faculty colleagues all expressed a belief in holding students accountable. Zeke framed his comments on accountability in terms of how important it was for students in our program to master the language skills necessary to work in the Deaf community. He had this to say:

Students should be accountable for the language that they're learning because they're going to be out in the community and they need to be accountable for what they've learned so far, such as how to sign and be out in the community. And so that way they can pick up the skills so that they can communicate effectively.

To Alicia, a greater degree of accountability stemmed from the expectation for collaboration in a learner-centered classroom. She introduced the idea of students being accountable not only to the teacher, but to their classmates. She had this to say:

Being in that learner-centered classroom where there is more collaboration means that, you do have more responsibilities to the people in your class, so you have to come ready with your ideas, and you have to come ready to talk about things, and you have to come ready to perform certain activities and then you also have to be willing, that responsibility of being able to allow people to see you work as well.

Zeke carried the issue of accountability outside of the classroom. His expectation was that students would be more self-directed about their homework, spending adequate time in the ASL lab, and attending events in the Deaf community. This is what he had to say:

I expect them to do their homework, to go to the lab for the required hours, to socialize as they're supposed to, to be involved, to participate. I want them to develop a sense of their own responsibilities so that they can function appropriately in an ASL environment and my job is to encourage them and to empower them. To give them that sense of their own responsibility and to help them make good choices rather than no choices at all.

In addition to those already mentioned, there were other benefits of fostering the type of teacher and student relationship characteristic of learner-centered education. Joshua talked about the importance of relationship in terms of helping to avoid problems from arising. He stated, “I want a good relationship with students. If you don’t have a good relationship, that could either cause the students problems, or me problems.” When I asked the participants in my study what advice they would give to new faculty members about building the teacher/student relationship Diane had this to offer:

You've got to have that rapport. You've got to have a connection. So I would encourage a new teacher, to make sure that they connect with students—that's the most important thing--to keep the students motivated, to keep them wanting to learn. I think with my style, I try to be flexible and I try to be patient. I have lots of patience. And I build that connection; that’s kind of my style, to have a connection with students.

Diane saw this connection with students as key to motivating students in her classroom. In addition to motivating students, Diane also felt that building a strong relationship with her students encouraged them to be more collaborative, an essential component in learner-centered classrooms. She added:

I want the class to have that rapport with me and with each other. I don't want little separate groups and clicks in the class. I want everyone to work together.

Alicia added to Diane’s comments on collaboration when she said, “I think that the collaboration happens when they can see that this is attainable, that we’re in this together.”

Joshua addressed the idea that having a strong relationship with his students facilitated his ability to get full participation in classroom activities. Participation is not only central to learner-centered education but is also a crucial component of any foreign language class. He made his point this way:

I tend to build that relationship and get close to the students. It's important for me to show that I like each of them as individuals. And I always get every individual involved. I don't just go to one single person. I get everyone involved in the activities.

An additional component found in language classrooms is the issue of error correction and how faculty members must balance encouraging students' success while addressing errors they make in their use of the new language. Diane believed that relationship building and establishing a strong rapport with her students helped in managing this task of correcting errors while still being positive and encouraging to her students. She offered:

Well, you feel that connection. Because they could make mistakes during class, they might sign something incorrectly, they might have a sign production error, and then they would get embarrassed or they might feel awkward. And some people are very private. But if you've got that rapport where everyone works together, and everyone understands each other and they don't laugh when someone makes a mistake, they don't think badly about each other. There's that connection. And it's kind of like this confidential little group where we share all of our mistakes and then we go off our separate ways.

Joshua added to Diane's point about error correction and specifically talked about having the right relationship with students which then created the environment where he could correct student errors without discouraging them from persisting in the class. He said:

I wanna encourage them. I need to be positive. I need to tell them they've done a good job. Or if they made errors, I need to address fixing their errors. So I have to have a good rapport with individual students. And I notice if I do that, then they do the same thing. Whereas if I draw the line, and I don't make an effort to have a rapport with the students, then they think I'm not interested in them, and they think what's the point of coming to class?

An additional benefit that came from having a good relationship between teacher and students was the fact that it made the faculty member more responsive to the individual needs of the variety of learners in their classroom. Diane stated this succinctly when she said:

Everyone has a different learning style. Everyone learns in a different way. Some are visual, some are auditory, and some have to write things down to understand it.

Bev also acknowledged that students had a variety of learning styles and she talked about her awareness of the need for accommodating diversity in her classroom. She said:

Of course they're all unique and everyone's different and has to be dealt with in some way in the individual level to fit their needs to bring them up or slow them down. It's all about the learner, the student.

When she concluded her remark by saying it is all about the student, she was expressing a clearly learner-centered concept. Her colleague Calvin shared her perspective and talked about the need for faculty members to be adept at handling a variety of students and learning styles. He had this to say:

So a good teacher, like a good parent has to know what to give their students and when. You've got to have different ways of teaching, not just one way. You've got to be able to adapt. And you can't just teach your one style. It's not like a factory where you just teach the same thing in the same way over and over and over.

Dana took the next step on the subject of diverse learning styles and talked specifically about a strategy she used to accommodate a variety of learners. She said:

I try to find out, first of all their background as far as the classes they have taken and also my key questions what type of learner do they think they are. If they're highly visual, or if they're auditory, or a kinesthetic type of learner, or all of the above. That's mainly how I ask them to evaluate themselves and really how they perceive themselves to be, and then I try to build upon that.

Calvin agreed with his colleagues' assessment of accommodating a variety of learning needs in the learner-centered classroom. He addressed the need for faculty members to be flexible enough in their teaching that they can adapt to the diversity of learning styles in their classrooms. He offered:

But if you only have one way, even if you're perfect in that one style, I don't think that's good; because it might not work with the other students. Maybe it's incompatible with other people in the class. You know, that might work with two or three out of twenty-five students in your classroom. So what are you going to

do with those other students? How are you going to compromise? You've got to be flexible. You've got to identify, you got to observe everybody and adapt to his or her level, where they are.

In addition to accommodating various learning styles, my colleagues demonstrated the belief that a strong teacher/student relationship also facilitated the ability to work with students across the age range found in our classes. Bev puts it simply, "Age can be a factor." When faculty members are learner-centered and take the time to develop rapport with each of their students, they believe they can be more successful at including all of their students, regardless of their age. Alicia attributed her ability to accommodate students of varying ages to her experiences with the MLI. She offered:

Murguia also taught me how to include different generations within a classroom. So incorporating not just lecture but more visual, visual aids, and also incorporating more technology in the classroom. I think that really hits the different generations as well.

Calvin shared a similar concern for addressing the needs of older students in his classroom. He stated that age differences can cause some students in his class to be uncomfortable. He recognized this and talked about his strategy to resolve any issues that may arise. He said:

Or some of my students are older, maybe forty-five and up. And the other students make them feel uncomfortable because they're so young. I try to eliminate that as a factor. Somehow, let them know age doesn't matter and everybody can learn if they go through the learning process.

When I asked my colleagues just how they go about building the relationship crucial to a learner-centered classroom environment, their responses included a wide variety of measures. Their suggestions included things like effective listening, exhibiting empathy for students, using email and social media for communication, and using humor in the classroom. Dana began by offering a suggestion on developing rapport. She said:

I really try to get them to open up and talk about their experiences and establish a rapport with them. And I really do take the time, the best time with the students to find out a little bit about their background.

For her, just making the effort to connect with her students helped build the relationship between the teacher and student. Her colleague, Calvin, also talked about his connection with students and how he believed it is central to the education process. He offered:

I think the most important thing in the communication process is listening. If you have good listening skills, you can establish good vibes, good feelings, make that connection. And then that successful communication can lead to learning and acquisition and their development. If there's no communication, how can I teach them?

Sometimes students might feel intimidated by their instructor, especially in a second language classroom where the two do not share a common language. Diane talked about her efforts to accommodate students who might be fearful. She said:

If I see someone acting a little bit intimidated or frightened, I'll say "Hey, what's wrong?" Or I'll write notes. Get them to have a conversation with me, and say, "Oh no, you've got the wrong impression! I'm not frightening!" And then I can get rid of those misperceptions pretty quickly. And that does happen every once in

a while. And then I do have students who consider me as their favorite and they want to take my class again and again and again.

Other faculty members talked about the importance of welcoming students in their offices even outside of posted office hours. Bev stated "I'm pretty approachable. And also my door tends to always be open. Accessibility is a big thing." Dana talked about how she welcomed students by:

...letting them know immediately, that my door is always open. One thing I voice is that, even though I have the set standard office hours, my door is always open and available to you if you need to come see me.

Calvin also reported being accessible to students and the fact that the teacher role extends far beyond what happens in the classroom. He said:

I think a positive environment is important. You know, I have an open door policy, and I know that's the philosophy of the department and I want to continue that. And I think that's a really strong foundation that the department has. I think if I were to just come to work, show up, teach my class and leave; that's not what we believe in here in the department. That's not what I want.

In addition to being available to our students, another learner-centered behavior that the participants in my study addressed is simply reaching out to students to create a connection. Alicia stated:

I do arrive early to classes so that I can talk to students. I think kind of that just opening up and breaking the ice in any way is important, like indicating, "Oh I really like that blouse," or you know, "what a great backpack. Where would you

find something like that?" Kind of lets them know you're human too and opens up that line of communication.

Alicia also talks about building connections with her students outside of the classroom, even going so far as to meet their friends and family members. She offered this comment:

The other thing is finding opportunities where the invitation can be made. "So I'm going to this Deaf Event on Saturday, who all is going? Ok, see you there. We'll talk there." And making a point to meet their friends and family, whoever goes with them. So again you take an interest in them.

Alicia justified her efforts at making connections with students by talking about the trust that developed as a result. Her belief was that trust is an essential component in the teacher/student relationship. Her colleague, Calvin stated that trust helps alleviate the negativity associated with making mistakes in the classroom. He believed that his students were more willing to take risks with their second language learning process if they felt like they trusted their teacher and their peers. For Alicia, remembering what was important to her students helped build that trusting relationship. She also had this to say:

There has to be a lot of open communication. A lot. Because we have to build trust so the relationship has to be built on lots of communication, lots of trust, of course it can still have all of its boundaries. You don't have to be friends but you have to have a very respectful relationship to one another much like you would see in a working environment.

Several of the participants in my study talked about the use of technology in helping to establish a personal connection with their students. They included things like

e-mail and social networking as ways to connect with their students, both of which students are comfortable with. Joshua talks about his strategy for connecting with students who miss class. He likes to follow up with them through email to help keep them engaged in the course:

Sometimes, like, for example, one student who missed class. They sent me an email about what had happened. And the next class they came and I always ask them, "Are you okay?" I follow up with them. And if a student is absent two or three times in a row, I follow up. I send them an email and I say, "Hey are you okay? Let me know what's going on?" And then when they show up, I talk with them and remind them, "Look, don't be absent. You can't be absent more than four times." We have that open communication.

Bev talks about email as a quick way to respond to questions posed by students.

She had this to say:

They feel so comfortable just shooting me a one-line email and it doesn't take 10 seconds to respond. That gives them the ok to ask. If you don't ask you just wonder, you wonder yourself into a hole.

And according to Bev, her students appreciate being able to ask quick questions through email. She provides an example by saying:

One of them emailed me back and said, "Oh my God I'm so glad you keep checking email. I have so many questions." And I just responded, "Sure, it's a great way to ask questions."

This is just another way of being as accessible to our students as possible. Using email to communicate with students fits in with the comments made earlier about having an open

door policy and being available to students even outside of class time and posted office hours. In addition, it accommodates the needs of students' demanding schedules using a medium they are familiar and comfortable with.

Alicia also talks about the use of other forms of social media to foster the relationship with her students. She offers:

We can email them all the time, we can Facebook them with messages. With ACES there's the chat. We do have certain times where, you know, "If anybody wants to talk about this assignment, get on the instant message with that and we can talk about that." So I think that's, just opening up venues to be able to communicate with each other is really important.

Her colleague, Dana supports the idea of using social networking as a way to effectively communicate with her students. She says:

Everybody's using social networking and how we can apply that social networking into our classroom or how we can incorporate that into our teaching style or even the communicating with the students helps build that relationship.

Whether faculty members work to build their relationship with students by being accessible, reaching out to students in class, or through email and social media, the participants in my study seemed certain that building relationships with students is essential in a learner-centered classroom. Several of the participants in my study talked about the role that empathy plays in helping to develop strong teacher/student relationships. Bev begins by addressing first time college attendees, one of the common characteristics of our student population at San Antonio College:

For one thing that person is probably the first to be in college and no one else in the family gets it, just how important it is to show up.

Calvin shares a similar belief about empathy for students contributing to an effective teacher/student relationship. He has this to say:

I believe we've got to be flexible. We need to understand and rapport requires that we have good empathy with students; with their education, with their experiences, with their family.

Dana talks about the importance of being sensitive to the demands that our students face outside of their experience at school. She adds:

First and foremost, we need to be sensitive to the students' needs. I'm there to listen and I, again, I'm just really sensitive to whatever's going on in their life. I try to be very understanding and I know that it's something everybody goes through.

Dana goes on to say that she believes she has a particular advantage in feeling empathy for her students because she is a graduate of this program and she has first-hand knowledge of the challenges they may be facing in school:

I draw a lot from my experience because I know how it feels to be in their shoes. I think that I'm sensitive to what they're talking about. I think it's really difficult for students too. It's tough being a student. Especially trying to be a student and also having a life or a job or family outside of that. 'Cause they're here, they're trying to do their best and I can't penalize them for life. Those things are going to happen.

Bev points out that the challenges our students face outside of class include things like, “children, parents, money, it just makes it so hard. Bless their hearts”. Zeke also talks about the importance of empathy for our students and treating everyone the same. He offers:

Have a positive attitude with ALL students, not just the ones you like. Be understanding to personal situations in students' lives. Be willing to work with students. Not every student is single with no children.

He goes on to say that he works hard to show his concern for students and believes every teacher “should also have a soft heart”.

Bev contributes to this thread by stating that part of feeling empathy for our students includes understanding the challenges they face in our classroom. She recounts a recent experience where she was involved in teacher development and experienced some of what her students may be going through:

I noticed when it was my turn to present, even though I'm quite knowledgeable in my field, when I was presenting to my peers, I was a nervous wreck. And I thought that was really funny, that I would be nervous when I've been teaching for all these years. I think I'm a much better teacher after taking those classes. Just because I realized, “Ooh, this is not easy.” I wanted to be right all the time. And when you're not, even if you don't turn it in, if you think you might not be right, it's very deflating.

According to my colleagues, being empathetic to our students and developing a strong teacher/student relationship also includes demonstrating to students that teachers make mistakes. Zeke begins by saying:

I want to make sure that I don't look like that person that's perfect. I'm not a perfect person. I want them to realize it's us in this boat together.

Calvin continues by sharing one of the strategies he uses for addressing mistakes that may occur in the classroom:

I tell them, "Sometimes I make mistakes. And that, you know, everyone makes mistakes, we can learn from it; it's no big deal". And if you model that, then students will trust you.

When I asked Bev about the type of response she gets from students when she makes mistakes in class she was quick to offer:

I think they think, "Oh wow. She's not perfect." You know? So it kind of makes us all human. Instead of...instead of this teacher student thing, I mean Yes, I'm still the teacher. They're the student. But on a human level, we're more equals. And I think they need to know that we can screw up. And there's always something. It always happens. There's always something. But there's ways to fix it too. That nobody's punished, I don't feel bad, it just happened.

Finally, Zeke talks about his approach to using empathy in building a strong teacher/student relationship and the type of message he tries to instill in each of his students:

And you know, I care. And every class, when it's completed, I always tell students, "You know, stay in school. Finish what you started. Make sure you accomplish your goals. Whatever your major is, make sure that you finish. Don't leave before you're done, before you graduate. Do well. Good luck in the future." I always talk to them about that and try and leave them with a positive comment.

The first theme in research question 3 was Teacher/Student Relationship. The participants in my study talked about their beliefs regarding the importance of building a strong relationship with their students using key words like rapport, shared power, mutual respect, empowerment, and accountability. These ideas are consistent with the literature on learner-centered education.

They also expressed their belief that when teachers and students enjoy a good relationship, there are multiple benefits. These include things like avoiding problems as well as an increase in student motivation, collaboration with their peers, and overall participation in the classroom. In addition, the participants in my study mentioned the positive effect that a good teacher/student relationship has on error correction, the ability to work with a community of diverse learning styles and ages.

My colleagues went on to offer strategies that they used to foster a strong teacher/student relationship. These included concepts like building a strong connection with their students by listening to their concerns and addressing students' fears quickly. They also discussed the benefit of being accessible to their students through office hours, outside of office hours, and via technology like email and social media. Another effective strategy for building a strong teacher/student relationship involved the concept of modeling imperfection. This means demonstrating for students that perfection is unrealistic and should not be the students' expectation. Finally, the participants in my study mentioned the importance of empathy for students and a recognition of the curriculum based demands students face in school as well as the challenges of family life and jobs outside of school. The next theme will address my colleagues' beliefs about the importance of the psychological environment in learner-centered classrooms.

Psychological environment.

In the review of the literature in Chapter 2, I addressed the idea that learning a second language can often cause students to feel stressed, fearful, or intimidated. In some studies, students ranked learning a second language as more stressful even than math class. It is no surprise then that students in an ASL/English interpreter-training program, where the demands go beyond merely acquiring a second language, are going to feel much anxiety. For this reason, it is imperative that faculty members take into consideration the effects of the psychological environment and to work to make second language acquisition and learning the interpreting process as *angst free* as possible.

The participants in my study talked at length about creating a psychological environment in the classroom conducive to success. Diane does a good job of summarizing the importance of creating the right psychological environment for acquiring a second language:

I would want students to feel comfortable; comfortable making mistakes, comfortable learning new skills. You know, language skills, it can be very awkward acquiring language skills. People aren't comfortable using facial expression if they've never signed before. So I want students to feel comfortable. And that's it's OK to make mistakes and that it's fine, it's a learning process and we'll get through these mistakes together. And to not feel ashamed or to feel embarrassed. And to not think, "Oh, I'm stupid," and then drop the class. I don't want that to happen.

Bev also believes that creating a safe environment in the classroom is necessary for students to learn. She states, "Just because I know I can't learn if I'm feeling

intimidated. I'm not going to try.” We can gather from her statement that she draws from her own experiences and preference for a safe learning environment to create a similar classroom environment for her students. Bev goes on to say that the entire ASL/IT department works to create a safe environment:

I try and tell them too in the beginning of the semester, that this whole department is a safe environment...we want you to interact. This is a good place to make a mistake. No one is going to lash you for it.

Diane shares Bev's belief and adds, “The classroom environment has to be calm and relaxing. And if you don't have those connections, the classroom environment is going to be tense.” For Diane, students who feel tense will not be as receptive to the learning experience as they need to be. She elaborates by saying:

I don't want everyone to feel stressful or tense. I don't want to come in with an angry look on my face and just lecture and then leave class. I don't want things to be tense. That doesn't help students learn. We need to be flexible, we need to be warm, the environment needs to be comfortable, and that helps students to learn better. And that helps them to be comfortable to make mistakes.

Her colleague Calvin echoes her sentiment when he says, “Even though there are ups and downs that are part of it, I don't want them to feel like it's not safe. I let them know it's a safe environment.” One way of establishing an appropriate psychological environment is to check in with students at the beginning of class. This is a strategy that Calvin uses. He states, “I always see if anybody's got any comments or see how everybody's feeling before we begin in the first few minutes of class.” Calvin's belief in creating a safe psychological environment also includes the concept of allowing for

making mistakes as well as mitigating the intimidation some students may feel due to the age range within a second language classroom:

I let them know, this is a safe environment. Everyone makes mistakes; even me. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Maybe also with the psychological environment, if I know a couple of students aren't comfortable because of, you know, maybe another student in the class, maybe that student influences them. Or some of my students are older, maybe forty-five and up. And the other students make them feel uncomfortable because they're so young. I try to eliminate that as a factor.

Joshua shares one of his methods of creating the appropriate psychological environment for learning:

I get everyone up in front of the class. And I'll tell everyone to relax and to breathe. And then when they're through everyone applauds. Whether they did excellent or not, everyone applauds because we're all students, we're all learning. So I encourage them that eventually they will all get better, no one is going to fail, they all laugh. And I want them to know that I'm a caring person, I care about them.

Joshua is specifically addressing the issues around anxiety and second language learning when he offers encouragement to all of his students, assuring them that they will improve in their use of ASL. The concept of encouragement is also a strategy shared by his colleague, Bev. She offers, "I try to do stuff that encourages them so they don't always get so frustrated."

Diane also believes that creating a safe environment is essential to learning and she helps create that safe environment using both encouragement and checking in with her students:

The students have to feel comfortable. If I look at them and see that they're uncomfortable, I have to figure that out and encourage them, and help them to feel comfortable in the class. It's important to me that everyone is comfortable with me, and that everyone does well in the class. Psychologically, I have to check in and see if there is a disconnect, and try to rebuild that rapport.

When I asked Diane about her strategy for addressing a student who might feel uncomfortable in her class she offers, “Well, I go meet with them and I try to be friendly and smile and to talk to them and find out what they’re doing or encourage them to talk to me.”

Zeke very clearly states his approach to creating the psychological environment conducive to a learner-centered experience:

I don't want to come into class and be serious and stern like I'm the boss or something. I always open class and talk about how we're peers with one another. You know, I'm no better than anyone else in the room. I want the students; from the minute I go in the classroom, to feel comfortable with me. And from the ‘get go’ I want that to be in place.

For Zeke, students must first feel comfortable in the classroom before a successful learning experience can occur.

Calvin also talked about some of the reasons students might feel uncomfortable, especially in a second language classroom, and how this discomfort interferes with the

type of safe, psychological environment he is striving to provide. Calvin addresses the importance of students not comparing their performance to others in the class. He feels it is more important to consider each student's beginning point with where they are presently. He offers:

Maybe they feel like the competition level is very high and they compare themselves to other students and they think they're not as good. I try to let them know that you don't compare yourself with other students you look at your learning process from Point A to Point B and see how much you've improved. That's what you should compare with. I encourage them not to compete. They need to look at how much they improved form Point A to Point B. I mean, if someone's already a good signer, they might not improve very much. But if someone's not a great signer, they might improve a whole lot. So you can't really look at comparing individuals; I don't want them to compare against each other.

He goes on to address other possible sources of anxiety that may interfere with a safe psychological environment:

So many things can affect the psychological environment. Could be me, could be the peers, could be the curriculum itself. If they're overwhelmed, if you know, it's a big gap from ASL2 to ASL3 and some students feel overwhelmed. Maybe they've got some fears and they think, "Am I good? Am I not good?" Maybe they've got low self-esteem? Maybe they feel like "Oh, I don't know, I'm not sure if I'm smart enough. I studied for three hours and some other students just read it once and they know it already and I don't understand. That's not fair."

Calvin's colleague Diane introduces another possible source for anxiety that can interfere with the psychological environment in a learner-centered classroom. She talks about the importance of having good rapport with students and the need to balance encouragement with error correction for second language learners. She says:

Well, you feel that connection. Because they could make mistakes during class, they might sign something incorrectly, they might have a sign production error, and then they would get embarrassed or they might feel awkward. And some people are very private. But if you've got that rapport where everyone works together, and everyone understands each other and they don't laugh when someone makes a mistake, they don't think badly about each other. There's that connection. And it's kind of like this confidential little group where we share all of our mistakes and then we go off our separate ways.

For Diane, a safe psychological environment is necessary for students to make mistakes and then be receptive to error correction from their peers or their teacher without embarrassment. Alicia agrees that creating a safe environment is essential in a learner-centered classroom. She says, "I've also indicated that this is a safe environment by opening up. Like, being the first one to give feedback to myself. I use the word 'we' a lot. We can do this. We can divide and conquer." Her colleague, Calvin, also addresses the attention necessary for effective error correction:

Well, it's OK to make mistakes. Mistakes are wonderful. You know, we have peaks and valleys while we're learning. And I let them know that at the beginning of class. This is a safe environment. We're not going to talk about you. Everything that happens here is confidential. I hope that whatever happens here

stays here, just like Las Vegas, same kind of idea. And then they laugh about that. And then I say, "The evaluations, when I videotape you, it's for my eyes only. I'll watch them, and then I'll give them back to you." And I explain to them that sometimes you'll make a mistake and this is a safe environment that's OK. Keep going; just keep trying to do it.

It is apparent that the participants in my study are aware of the need to create a safe environment where errors are a normal part of the learning and error correction is done with care. Alicia goes on to say:

Some thing too that I incorporate is when we start the procedure, feedback will only be positive, will be in observable terms...so that it does feel safe. As people feel safe and comfortable then, and only then can we start transitioning more into giving more constructive feedback from our peers.

Her colleague, Joshua also talks about his approach to offering error correction in a way that is not intimidating and helps to maintain the safe psychological environment:

And if I'm talking to someone and I've noticed a student feels very sensitive if I correct their signs. Then I'll bring them in and say, "Now, remember. I'm here to teach and you're here to learn. And the important thing is that you learn here at the college, the purpose is your learning. It's not for you to feel bad." So I just try to help them by fixing their errors in ASL 1. And let them know, "My error correction is not gonna kill you. It's not gonna be fatal." And then they laugh. That makes them feel better. So I want them to feel comfortable with me as a teacher.

Finally, Dana talks about how creating a safe environment for collaboration and constructive feedback from their peers is not limited to just the ASL/IT classroom. The benefits will carry over into the professional lives of young graduates:

Not only am I establishing that rapport with them, but I also encourage peer support as well to kind of emphasize a safe environment, especially with this program. Because I tell them, eventually when you get out of here, most of you will be working together so it helps that you already have that relationship established. I think that will make their work a lot easier.

The participants in my study demonstrate the belief that creating a safe psychological environment is crucial to the learner-centered classroom even more so for a second-language classroom. They addressed the anxiety that comes with learning a second language as well as the need to be able to correct student's errors without discouraging them. It is also clear from their comments that my faculty colleagues are committed to providing the appropriate environment where students can take risks, learn from their mistakes, and feel successful in the process of acquiring a second language. In the next section, I have addressed specific classroom behaviors that the participants in my study believe foster a learner-centered environment.

Teacher behaviors.

In this section I address the most salient learner-centered teacher behaviors shared by the participants in my study. The behaviors I discuss are: 1) making learning fun, 2) providing collaborative learning opportunities, 3) encouraging students, 4) adapting to students' needs, 5) making learning relevant, and 6) other learner-centered behaviors. A

better awareness of exactly what teachers do in the classroom can help to inform the process of becoming a learner-centered educator for other faculty members.

Making learning fun.

While there were many enjoyable revelations in the process of conducting my study, I was particularly delighted at uncovering this construct. After completing the coding process for all of the transcribed interviews I decided to sort the data based on frequency of occurrence. I had not really planned on doing this step as part of my formal methods for the study but my curiosity got the best of me.

If I tried to predict which codes would occur in high frequency, I would assume something like *meaning of learner-centeredness* or *evidence of learner-centered practices* to be somewhere near the top. After all, there were questions in my informal interview guide that addressed these specific topics. I should assume that the participants would respond in such a way that would yield a fair number of coded items with these designations. But what surfaced as the code with the greatest incidence of occurrence was surprising and made me quite happy.

The code with the highest incidence of occurrence was *making learning fun*. This was surprising to me because I did not have any question in my interview guide that asked how faculty members make their classes fun. It made me quite happy because I firmly believe that learning should be a fun process. I learn best when I am enjoying the experience and I try to make the learning experience in my classroom fun for my students. I am happy that I get to work in a department where my colleagues also seem to value making the classroom experience fun for their students.

The participants in my study talked about creating a fun learning environment and suggested several benefits that come from making learning fun. These benefits ranged from simply an acknowledgement that the students understood the teacher's stories told in the second language to creating a sense of engagement and motivation with their students. Calvin begins the discussion about the use of fun in the classroom in a way that reveals something about his own sense of humor:

And I try to make class fun. It's kind of like being in a roller coaster; it's got ups and downs. But it's still fun. In the end, everyone's had fun and you've enjoyed it. Or maybe someone got sick and threw up, I don't know. But, most percent of students have fun.

So, while the learning experience can be fraught with both highs and lows, Calvin hopes that in the end his students mostly enjoyed their learning experience. Zeke believes in using humor in his classes. "You know, I kind of joke around with them. I believe a teacher should have a sense of humor." For Dana, having fun is just a part of who she is. She says, "I also use humor as well. That's a part of me though, that's part of my personality".

Zeke traces his connection to fun while learning back to his formative years watching comedians like Jerry Lewis or Abbott and Costello. The visual nature of their comedy appealed to him as a young Deaf boy:

I grew up watching Jerry Lewis or Abbott and Costello, and different comedians like that. And you know, they were very funny to watch. It was a visual thing for me to watch and I learned lots of things, different actions that were right and wrong. I would compare that to showing up to school and just listening to the

teacher, it was so boring. I remember just sitting in class thinking, “Oh my God, how many more hours of school are left?” Because I was so bored. It wasn't fun. It wasn't fun at all. And I wasn't learning anything. If it was fun, I think I would've learned something. So I think when someone has a sense of humor, you learn from that.

Zeke has carried this belief into the classroom with him and still teaches with fun in mind. He goes on to say:

Overall, I think humor, being assertive, involving the students, and again, having a good relationship with the students. And I think that makes the environment fun and it's easier for them to learn. You know, I don't think that a serious environment is going to be conducive to them learning. If you're not going to have fun in class, you're not going to learn anything.

Alicia shares a perspective similar to Zeke's. She also feels that students do not learn as much if the class is not having fun. She addresses the impact a lack of fun can have on the energy level in class:

If we're not having fun, because the days that I am just wiped for whatever reason, the energy level is low in the classroom, they're thinking it's boring, I'm thinking it's boring. We're just like, we're all looking at the clock. What time is it over?

For Alicia, a low energy level makes it difficult for her to create that sense of fun in the classroom. This translates into a boring class where everyone is just waiting for the time to end. She goes on to talk about one of the benefits of encouraging fun learning experiences. To Alicia, making a learning activity fun is one way to mask the fact that the lesson may actually be about something technical or complicated:

It's not always about all these linguistic things that we need to know, but also get them to do it in a fun way so they don't even realize that they learned it. Play a game with them. And have them do it. And then say, "Remember in that game when we did this? That was the name of this thing." You know, so it doesn't always come across as so dry.

Alicia goes on to talk about other benefits of keeping the fun in learning activities. From her experience, students feel less self-conscious if they are having fun and this is a key benefit in a second-language environment because of the stress that is frequently associated with learning a new language. She also believes that she can keep student's attention better by making the classroom fun:

I think it opens a person up. You don't feel so self-conscious when we can laugh and we can play together. I think that when you can put some laughter in there it's kind of unexpected. It keeps people kind of listening. Like, what else are you going to say and when are you going to say it?

Her colleague, Diane also uses fun to keep students engaged and to reduce boredom. She can tell when students need to be redirected and will intentionally do something fun to get students back on board:

When I see the students getting restless in their seats, I'll tell some story from my experiences. I'll tell them a story and get them laughing so we can keep things going because I don't want them to get bored. When I see them getting bored, I have to come up with some story to keep them interested.

For Diane, sharing humorous stories serves to get students laughing so that she can keep them engaged with the material. Joshua talks about how he also uses humor in the classroom to raise the energy level in class and keep his students' attention:

I think because I want the class to have fun. I want them to feel the emotion of fun, that the class can be fun. And sometimes I've noticed when I'm teaching, if everyone seems to be a little bit lazy or tired, I'll throw in some comic relief to get their attention again. To get them motivated. So I noticed, I can interject that every once in a while. Over the years I've seen that when classes start to doze, I interject humor.

Calvin also believes in using humor as a way of making a connection with his students and helping to build rapport:

Well, I use a sense of humor, kind of an icebreaker at the start of class. And I often tell jokes or I use humor. And it's not like I'm a drill sergeant where I'm teaching everyone rigidly and they have to tow the line, but there's a balance. You can be serious and humorous and have fun and have a safe environment and that's going to lead to that rapport building.

His colleague, Diane admits that having fun in the classroom benefits the teacher as well as the student. She feels a certain lift when she sees students having fun while learning.

She says:

Sometimes we joke around with each other, I tell stories, or we tease with each other. And looking back I think about when I had fun in school and I want my students to have fun. And I want to see their facial expressions, I want to see them light up. And it inspires me when I see my students having fun.

I like that she talks about students *lighting up* and the fact that she takes inspiration from this. Diane also talks about her use of humor and fun in the classroom but with a more practical benefit. Keep in mind, the participants in my study are engaged in teaching ASL as a second language and ASL/English interpreting to classrooms full of new language learners. All of the language classes are taught completely in sign and comprehension is sometimes incomplete. Diane's use of humor and stories can serve as an indicator as to whether or not her students understand what she has just said:

When they're laughing, that means they comprehend my story. They understood the information. Then if they don't understand, I can tell when it goes past them. But if they're laughing, I know they've understood and that makes me feel better that they understood and they all laughed.

She goes on to talk about another benefit of making the learning experience fun for students. Diane addresses the idea of engagement and student retention:

I think if you're not having fun, you're not learning. You're not going to be motivated to continue in the program. And my goal is to keep students engaged. To keep them through the program so they graduate. So I want to make class comfortable, I want it to be fun.

Both Alicia and Dana are graduates of the program they now teach in. This gives them a unique perspective that they can share with their students. I can imagine that this gives them a unique and very valuable kind of credibility that my other colleagues and I cannot offer to our students. Dana has this to say about her use of fun in the classroom and the benefit she sees for her students:

I would hope my students would say my class is fun. Because if we make it interesting for them and fun, then it's not going to seem like a chore. And that's something that they'll be motivated to continue with. I think it'll definitely enhance their motivation to attend class. To not miss, perhaps if they had a math class they didn't think was very fun, they would probably prefer to come to my class. I think it really influences their motivation, so that's what my goal is.

Alicia echoes Diane and Dana's sentiments about the importance of student retention and the role that fun can play. Recalling her time as a student in the department she says:

Well I'm just thinking, like in the past. If it wasn't fun for somebody, everybody kept dropping out. Every, like when I was a student too, they would talk about, "Oh, this is too hard! Ugh!" And people weren't having fun and so they would just leave. And they would say things like, "Well, I remember when I started this, this was like super fun. I loved coming to class, I loved doing this, you know, I loved going to these events. And I don't love it anymore." And they would just leave, and only people who really had fun with it wound up staying and graduating.

I think Alicia's comments are especially suitable to concluding this section on the role of fun in a learner-centered environment. She talks about how fun is not only important for students now as they progress through the curriculum but how fun is also an essential part of persistence in the career of ASL/English interpreting:

Um, I want them to remember fun because I think part of it is, I like to laugh, I want them to laugh...um, That it wasn't just about work, it was also about them finding pleasure in all of this and so I think that's so important for the longevity of

our career in this and to find those opportunities when you can laugh, because, like, I'm thinking, this is super stressful as a student and then equating that to like work, and having to do some of the assignments that we do. Those can be really stressful. But if you can find those lighter moments, it makes it all worthwhile, and we will come back to work the next day, you know, ready to do it again. But I think too, fun is about adventure and this interpreting is an adventure. No matter where you want to go, interpreting can take you there. That's why I tell them all, "What are your dreams? What are your passions?" And incorporate that into teaching interpreting.

For the participants in my study having fun in the classroom and making learning an enjoyable experience has many benefits that could be considered learner-centered. My colleagues gave examples of their use of fun in the classroom for the purposes of reducing boredom and increased learning. They also use fun to boost the energy level of a classroom where student attention seems to be fading. Fun can be used to lower inhibitions, an important benefit in a second language classroom, and to mask the challenges inherent in learning difficult or technical concepts.

My colleagues also believe that making learning fun can help build rapport with their students, which leads to increased retention of students in the department. Finally, they believe that creating a sense of fun can benefit the persistence and longevity of our students as they transition into the profession as ASL/English interpreters and can reduce burnout for new professionals. In the next section, I will address the concept of collaborative learning in the learner-centered classroom.

Providing collaborative learning activities.

San Antonio College encourages collaborative learning across the curriculum.

The Department of ASL/IT also believes in the benefits of collaborative learning. Many of the faculty members incorporate collaborative learning projects into their classes. The types of collaborative activities can range from simple pair practice of signed dialogues in an ASL class to a group research and presentation project. Collaborative learning is also a tenet of learner-centered education.

Dana talks about her method of pairing students in the language courses so that they can practice specific dialogues:

Typically in ASL 1 it's more pairs so I don't use large groups, but I want to be able to see them talk to each other in pairs, so we can correct errors. I think maybe in sign language it's different because you have to have them practicing together. And they help each other. They can fix sign production errors with each other. And once I see everyone's doing it, fine, then we move on to the next topic.

One of the benefits according to Dana is the ability to see students modeling their work and to have an opportunity for error correction. She points out that error correction can come from the students or from the faculty member. Her colleagues also talked about an extensive use of pair practice with students in the ASL classes. Joshua talks about his use of collaboration in pairs during the ASL classes:

For ASL 1, I tend to do pair practice where I watch them work together in teams of two. And then when they're done, I have them get in front of the class and go through that process. That way we have the opportunity for everyone to see, and

everyone can watch everyone else's performance and I have the opportunity to give feedback, or praise.

Bev adds:

I do a lot of mixing everybody up. And I think a lot too, with that Murguia, or the classes I took, we got good techniques with how to do small groups, how to do partners, how to do, you know, different ways to create that where you're not always with the person right next to you, which I think was very helpful. And I think about it a lot. Now, how can I mix them up?

For Bev, there is benefit in collaborating in pairs and she takes this one step further by encouraging her students to work with different partners for the paired activities. Dana also uses what she calls a *buddy system* where students are teamed up for collaboration but then the teams are rotated throughout the semester:

I again encourage them to talk with one another and I also set up a buddy system where I partner them up to work with two or three people every four weeks and we alternate so that again, they have an opportunity, they know that they have a relationship with everybody in their classroom or they at least talked at least for four weeks and they worked together and so I think that that really enhances their learning experience. But I think when they work in the groups, they learn to work independently from me just giving them the instruction.

For Dana, the benefit of working collaboratively offers a couple of benefits; students can build relationships with each other, and they can learn to function independently from their teacher. Both of these concepts contribute to a learner-centered classroom. The concept of working independently is also an important idea mentioned by Alicia. She

talks about the students in internship class needing to adapt to working with multiple consumers and colleagues:

In the internship, everybody has to pair with everybody as well. It's not just you are out on your own but you have to rely on everybody, me being part of that mix as well. Everybody's going to have to work. Also, who we pull in from outside in that class. So it's not just what we do as a class, you know, but how we incorporate the mentors, deaf clients, and hearing clients, and all of that. So it is a much bigger piece.

Diane mentions one activity in her class where she will ask students to view a video of a story told in ASL. Students are then asked to work collaboratively, in small groups, to answer a series of questions based on the video they viewed. During this activity she requires that students communicate with each other in ASL. This reinforces both the benefit of working in a group and the use of ASL to communicate in a meaningful way about a classroom topic. Her colleague Dana also talks about a small group activity she uses in her class, which focuses on cultural literacy. For this activity, students are allowed to use their dominant language, English:

And then we get into small groups and I encourage them to talk about what they know, say about Jesse Owens. Or talk about the fact that maybe some of them didn't know who he was and that's okay, because this is an opportunity for them to learn.

Calvin also makes use of collaborative learning for the purpose of working together as a team and for making the classroom learning applicable to their world outside of school. He has this to say:

And then when we're done, I don't just dismiss them. We talk about how we can apply that. Break them up into groups; have them do some group activities. Have them do some discussion and talk about their real world, their life experiences.

This helps to build the student's skills in collaboration as well as offering them a sense of the relevance of what they are learning. Alicia talks about a strategy she uses in one of her classes called 'round table'. This involves a group discussion by the whole class on something they have just learned or just worked with in class. In this activity, the teacher is an equal participant with the students as the group works together to construct meaning and relevance:

So, like in the Interpreting classes, we have a session called Round Table.

Everybody equal, come to the table, and put in your ideas. What have you learned, what have you seen? And that's always the place where if somebody has a question, I'm not always the one that's supposed to answer it. So it's, just throw your question out and see who can answer it.

In one of Diane's classes, she incorporates collaborative learning into a research and presentation assignment. Students work together to identify a topic of interest and then conduct research culminating in a presentation to the whole class.

Finally, Dana talks about her use of collaborative learning and suggests that she believes it helps students form important relationships and can foster their leadership skills. She says:

I think it just promotes an opportunity and promotes leadership. I think that sometimes people will find that they work well in small groups. But it also builds relationships and friendships and they learn. They find out a lot about each other

because I know that in their small groups they will go off topic and talk about other things. But I think that's just natural and it's an opportunity for them to get to know each other and sort of build a rapport with one another.

To summarize this section, the participants in my study talked about how they create a learner-centered environment through the incorporation of collaborative learning. For the teachers in the lower level ASL classes, collaboration often takes the form of pair practice. Several of my colleagues talked about the need for students to pair with different classmates throughout the semester. One of the benefits of this collaboration is an opportunity for faculty members to provide error correction and feedback and for students to learn to self-correct their own errors.

Several of the participants also talked about collaboration in small groups to conduct research and make presentations as well as in 'round table' discussions to collaboratively construct meaning. Finally, my colleagues addressed how collaborative learning activities fostered the development of relationships and helped students to hone their leadership skills. In the next section, I will address another learner-centered teacher behavior that I found in the data, namely how teachers encourage their students.

Encouraging students.

Offering encouragement to students seemed to be an important part of being learner-centered for the participants in my study. My colleagues talked about encouragement as a way to keep students motivated and help them recognize their potential. Another theme in this section is the feeling from faculty members that they are responsible to support students as they move through the curriculum. Diane works very hard to keep her students motivated and feeling positive about their progress. She offers:

Some students feel, like, depressed. Or they think it's hard, or they get discouraged. And it's my responsibility to motivate them, to support them. To tell them, "You can do this! You can make a good grade! I know you can do this!" "What's wrong? What don't you understand? Let me help explain this." Or I can send them to the lab for tutoring. They could also come to see me during my office hours for extra help.

For Diane, her role as encourager can help students to be successful in her courses and to keep going when they feel like the process is too stressful. She is there to offer them options for improving their work and to offer any assistance her students may need. Her colleague Joshua shares a similar belief. He says, "I encourage them that eventually they will all get better, no one is going to fail". Bev acknowledges that students may feel frustration and that it is her responsibility to offer encouraging words to those students who may be struggling more than their classmates:

Everyone processes at his or her own speed. Just because it seems hard for you right now doesn't mean that it's always going to be hard." And I try to do stuff that encourages them so they don't always get so frustrated.

Her colleague, Dana also encourages her students by sharing her own experiences in the program as a student. Because of her history, Dana brings an invaluable perspective that not many faculty members can offer to their students. She says:

I respond to them by sharing my experiences with them and also I think that I'm fortunate because we share the common thread that I was a student in this program. Again, pulling from my experience, but I let them know that we may

have a similar shared experience, the circumstances were probably a little bit different, but I can tell them how I was able to work through that.

For Dana, being able to relate to students on this level means that she can offer them practical advice for facing the challenges inherent in mastering ASL and the ASL/English interpreting process. Diane also offers advice and reassurance to students who are worried about their performance in class:

I encourage them, I try to give them advice and try to think positive. If they're worried about their grade, I say, “ You're doing okay, don't worry. We've got all this other homework that's going to raise your average. Don't worry. Keep going to ASL 2. Keep doing this. You can do this! You have the skill!”

Diane uses the term “we” here to emphasize to students that they are not on their own as they try to get through the courses. Her colleague Alicia demonstrates a similar belief when she says, “I use the word ‘we’ a lot. We can do this. We can divide and conquer”.

Zeke reiterates the belief that students should not be left to find their own way, rather faculty members should serve as their support system as they work their way through the curriculum:

But I'm not the type of teacher that thinks that they should learn on his or her own. I'm just the kind that's going to give them that little lift that's going to help them or guide them on what they need to learn.

Dana also talks about her belief in providing students with the support necessary to be successful. She talks about the influences from her time in the program as a student as well as her experiences in the Murguia Learning Institute during her first semester of employment at SAC:

There were a number of instructors here that were very supportive and wanted to see me continue the program and they just challenged me and encouraged me not to give up, even though I felt like giving up. Just that support system, I think. It didn't come from one person here in the department; it was several people. And so it was more of a collective effort to keep me on track. And that was probably the main thing that I learned from the MLI, what I saw the college trying to do, again, not only encouraging the students, but showing them that we are that support system for them to get them through this college experience and so they can transition into a four year institution or immediately start working in their field.

Another important aspect related to the construct of offering encouragement was the idea that faculty members should encourage students by helping them to see their potential. This is very valuable for students who may not be able to fully recognize the potential they have on their own. Diane talks about how she addresses students who need that special encouragement and insight into their own abilities:

Well, I'm encouraging. Some of them are worried about their C grade and I say, "Don't worry, do the homework. Do this. We can get your grade up. Your signs are really good, keep going. You can do this! I'm impressed! You're very clear." Or I'll write them a note and say, "You've got the potential. You can do this."

For many students, hearing this kind of encouragement from a Deaf faculty member can give them the push they need to keep going and not give up when they feel frustrated. For Joshua, he feels like it is his responsibility to let students know when they have potential to be successful as ASL/English interpreters. This perspective is

influenced by his own personal experiences as a Deaf individual who has felt the affects of a shortage of skilled ASL/English interpreters:

And I want them to feel like our program is important to them. And it's important to the Deaf community; that I represent the Deaf community, because I'm Deaf. And I want them to become interpreters because we're just screaming for more interpreters. And so that's why I always encourage them.

He also believes it is important to encourage students to pursue other options within the field of ASL and working with a Deaf population. For example, he will counsel students towards Deaf education if he believes that they are particularly suited to that profession. Joshua elaborates:

For example, there was one student who was a Deaf Support Specialist major and they wanted to do special education. They wanted to work with hearing students. And I said, "You know what? I think you'd be wonderful as a Deaf Education teacher." And she said, "Oh no, not me. I wouldn't sign so well." And I said, "Deaf students would love you because you're so giving, you're so motivated. You get along with the students so well. I think Deaf students would love you." And later on, they decided to try Deaf Education, and now they've been teaching Deaf Ed for five years and they love it!

For the participants in my study, offering encouragement to their students is an important part of being a learner-centered instructor. They cite examples of offering encouragement to help students cope with the challenges of learning a second language as well as sharing their own experiences as students. In addition, some faculty members

talked about their responsibility to help students recognize their potential and to offer them suggestions as to suitable career paths they might take.

The common thread in this section is that the faculty members in the Department of ASL/IT at SAC believe it is important to let students know that they are not alone on their journey, and that they have the support of the faculty members to help them be successful. In the next section, I will address the ways faculty members are responsive to the different needs of their students and how they adapt accordingly.

Adapting to students' needs.

For the participants in my study, another aspect of learner-centeredness that they believe they model is the ability to adapt to the varying needs of the students in their courses. Sometimes the adaptations are necessary because the students within the same class are at different levels and therefore have different needs. Sometimes the differences occur across multiple sections of the same course leading the teacher to adapt accordingly. Finally, the faculty members in my study noted that classes of students can vary from semester to semester and sometimes, things that were successful in one semester, may not be so effective in the next. Diane begins by talking about variations within one class of students:

When I'm ready to teach my class and I have my curriculum, I make eye contact with all my students. And what I see is variety. A variety of skills, different learning styles, maybe one student learns one way, and that may be different than any other student. So I have to make sure that everyone has access to the same information and they all understand the same thing. And I might have to adapt for each individual student while I'm teaching, just to make sure they are learning.

So I'm focusing on each of them as individual learners using the same curriculum and making sure that everyone gets it in the same way. And then if I'm working with another student and they don't understand, I try a different way. And if that doesn't work, I try a third option.

For Diane, one of the challenges of her job as a learner-centered instructor is to make sure that all of her students progress and benefit from her instruction even though they may be at varying skill levels. This is one of the most challenging aspects facing any faculty member. Her colleague, Calvin, shares a similar strategy as Diane in that he also talks about needing multiple ways to explain concepts to his students:

You've got to have different ways of teaching, not just one way. You've got to be able to adapt. And you can't just teach your one style. It's not like a factory where you just teach the same thing in the same way over and over and over and think of it like a job and just collect your paycheck. And I'm always thinking, You've got to have Plan A, Plan B, Plan C. You've got to have a backup plan. If you don't have a Plan B, you're stuck with Plan A and it doesn't work, that's too bad. What are you going to do? You've got to have alternate plans.

I think Calvin's statement that teaching is not like factory work is profound in its simplicity. Clearly, he and his colleague Diane understand the challenges inherent in working with students in the same classroom with varying levels of skills and abilities.

Dana shared with me how she will often try something new in class in an attempt to gauge exactly where the students stand in terms of their skills and strengths, even if the activity may have mixed results. She says:

And it doesn't always pan out and I just really gauge the students. I rely on their body language or their feedback. If it is through body language, I can sort of assess that this is something that's working for them or not and I adapt to that and I also ask them, "What would you like to do? How can we make this more beneficial for you all?"

Dana introduces an interesting concept here when she talks about asking the students what they want and how she can make the situation more beneficial to the students. This is clearly a learner-centered concept. Zeke also seems to be aware of some of the challenges in working with a group of students with diverse needs. He talks about the need to revise plans when they don't seem to be working:

If I'm doing something wrong, I need to change, to accommodate them.

Sometimes I feel like I need to do something better. Sometimes I need to go home and rethink what's happening, kind of re-strategize for the next class.

The idea of *re-strategizing* is one way that Zeke can relatively quickly, adapt his curriculum to meet the varying needs of his students. Sometimes, the curriculum just needs to be tweaked slightly in order to be the most effective for a particular student or group of students. Diane shares a similar belief when she says, "I also understand that the curriculum is not perfect. I have to make adaptations to it so that I can meet the needs of every individual student". Just like his colleagues, Calvin shared the belief that faculty members need to be flexible and adaptable when working with any group of students:

I never teach the same way. It's never routine. It's never the same drill; I'm always adapting what I'm doing. And sometimes it's a top down approach, sometimes it's a bottom up approach, but you don't do the same thing over and over and over.

And I don't specifically follow the course outline; I'm flexible. You know, I've got three sections of the same class but they're all different. And so I try to base it on what their needs are.

For Calvin, customizing his curriculum to meet the specific needs of his students is simply part of what it means to be a learner-centered faculty member.

Finally, Alicia shared with me her belief that faculty members need to be able to adapt their curriculum in order to accommodate the dynamics of the diverse needs of students across semesters:

I think different opportunities create different dynamics. And though, like, I say this kind of generally every semester has to play out differently, because, right? The students are different and their personalities are different. So what really worked effectively last semester can be introduced but how we carry it through is going to be so incredibly different based on those personalities. And then some semesters where like group work is so effective, if you have a class of all extroverts, that can get out of control. So you have to scale back what some of that looks like.

It is clear from their comments that the participants in my study understand the need to adapt their teaching and sometimes the curriculum according to the needs of individual students. This could mean making adaptations within one class, across multiple sections of the same course, or from semester to semester. In addition, since these responses all resulted from questions about what specific learner-centered behaviors they demonstrate in their classrooms, it is apparent that my colleagues believe adapting to the varying needs of their students is a learner-centered characteristic. In the next section,

I talk about my colleagues' beliefs about how learner-centered faculty should work to make learning relevant for the students in their classes.

Making learning relevant.

My faculty colleagues also talked about the importance of making the learning experience relevant for students in a learner-centered classroom. They seem to share the belief that students will retain the information better or will understand the importance of learning a specific skill when they know the practical purpose behind what they are being taught. The participants in my study help to provide the framework for relevance in several ways.

Diane talked about her strategy of using small group application exercises to demonstrate how concepts are relevant to the students' goals:

And there's lots of group interaction, have them working in groups. And I don't just lecture. I like to mix it up. I lecture briefly, and then we do application, and then we do activity. So that they can make that relationship between this is what I taught, and this is how we use it. So we do lots and lots of activities after each lesson lecture.

For Diane, including application exercises for students working in groups can help them understand that connection between theory and practice. Her colleague, Zeke, also works to build relevance for his students. He says, "I'm trying to make everything I do applicable and I give that more attention".

Another strategy for demonstrating relevance was shared by Calvin. He talked about doing small group activities similar to Diane but Calvin encourages his students to make connections between the content of the lesson and their own schema:

And then when we're done, I don't just dismiss them. We talk about how we can apply that. Break them up into groups; have them do some group activities. Have them do some discussion and talk about their real world, their life experiences.

For some faculty members, sharing their stories with the students in their classrooms helped to provide some relevance. Diane talked about the use of her own personal stories to help make her content applicable to real-world settings:

I like to add my own stories. So I do lots of supplemental teaching so they can apply concepts to what it is we're talking about. I try to have some kind of application to the real world, so I add my own stories. My most embarrassing moment, or when I fell, or I would explain some story and then give a chance to let them tell their most embarrassing moment; so that kind of thing.

It seems likely that sharing personal stories would contribute to making the lesson relevant to the students but in Diane's case it seems to serve the additional purpose of helping to strengthen the relationship with her students. For Joshua, sharing his stories helps students to remember the content better. He adds,

It seems to me when I shared my examples, my experiences; that seemed helpful to students. Instead of just explaining the textbook, they probably would forget that. But when I share with them my experiences or give them examples. I think those are key.

Their colleague, Dana, also shares personal stories to help her students see the practical use of what they are learning:

I always tell them something about my interpreting experience, even if it's not in an interpreting class. If it's for the Intra-lingual Skills class, I always tie in the

interpreting because that is a part of it. But the process of interpreting that I do tell them, “You know there was this one time where I encountered this and this is how I handled it.”

Another colleague shared with me his method for helping students to understand why they need to learn something. Calvin explained that he also shares stories about his life outside of the classroom but then added that he tries to make connections to many things outside of class:

And then I go through the lesson and tell them today we're going to be talking about this and this is why it's relevant. And I'm always prepared. I've got a back up plan; so I don't want to be caught by surprise. I want my cushion built in. And you know, we talk about our work life, and our personal life; all kinds of things outside of just what's in the curriculum. 'Cause everything's related, so we make all these connections to other things.

Finally, Dana shared one more way that she uses the story telling strategy to help students understand the relevance of the day's lesson. She includes examples of her own mistakes as a professional:

I'll also tell them of errors that I have made. That I am not a perfect interpreter and so I address that and I think that it'll help them when perhaps they make the same mistake or they'll try to avoid that. They'll say, “I don't want to have to go through what she went through with this particular assignment.” But if they do happen to make that mistake, they'll be able to relate to, “That's what she was talking about and it's okay because she did it too.”

For Dana, giving students examples of her past mistakes serves a couple of purposes. First it may help them to avoid the same pitfalls. Second, if students do find themselves making similar mistakes, they can take comfort in knowing that everything will be ok because they will remember their professor's experiences in the same situation.

The participants in my study practice the learner-centered behavior of helping their students to see the relevance in the lessons they are learning throughout the curriculum. They do this by providing application exercises as small-group activities in the classroom, providing students with real-world examples, sharing their own personal stories and relating past mistakes that they have made.

All of these measures serve to strengthen the connection between the theoretical nature of classroom learning and the applicability of what they are learning to their future as professionals. In the next section I will discuss an assortment of other learner-centered behaviors that I discovered during the analysis of the data from my study.

Other learner-centered behaviors.

This section includes other learner-centered behaviors that my faculty colleagues shared with me during my study. There were not enough occurrences of any single behavior to constitute a separate category, yet they still seemed important enough to be included in a description of the findings based on my analysis. The behaviors included in this section include things like simply checking in with students to see how they are doing, writing the day's agenda on the board at the beginning of class and fostering critical thinking skills.

First, Calvin typically begins a class with a brief check in with his students. This helps him determine if there are any unanswered questions and to generally gauge the mood of the class that day:

So, I always see if anybody's got any comments or see how everybody's feeling before we begin in the first few minutes of class. And then we start the lesson. I give everybody the big picture.

Calvin addresses the need of providing students with the "big picture". One way he may accomplish this is to start with reviewing previous material and also writing the day's agenda on the board. This helps students remember where they are in the curriculum for the semester and can help them see how the course is progressing:

I begin with a review in class. Do you have any questions over anything we've covered? Can I review something for you? Maybe cover some concepts again." We talk about any questions they might have. Anything they want me to review some more, so I add some of their questions to the board if there's something they struggled with last week, they can recover. Then I write down the agenda on the board so students have the big picture of what to expect for class.

The process of checking with students for items that need review and sharing the day's agenda help students stay on track and become more aware of how each day's activities tie in to the overall goals for the course. Dana shared with me the same strategy of keeping students informed about how the course is progressing and what is in store for the day:

I do a variety of things. I typically begin with writing on the board what we're going to be doing that day, what they can expect. That is something that I just try to do

every single day in class. Just so they can have an idea as to what we're going to be doing. What they can expect. So that's the first thing, and then I'll talk to them about that. I'll say, "Here are the activities that we've designed today or we'll be discussing this."

Their colleague, Joshua also writes the day's agenda on the board but he also makes a point to clarify for students how the lesson relates to the overall learning outcomes for the course:

I write notes on the board, every time that I write notes to start the class, I'll put the agenda. "This is what we're going to learn today. This is what we'll be doing." Also, I will interject the learning outcomes and say, "Okay, this is what I'm teaching today."

Joshua seems to place special emphasis on the learning outcomes for his courses and their influence on what he is teaching. He goes on to say,

Yes, the learning outcomes are clearly stated. Every time I'm planning on teaching, I look at my outline for what I'm teaching and I refer back to the learning outcomes to make sure that I'm covering the correct information. So that's as a reminder to myself. And I look back and make sure that I did all of the things on the learning outcomes.

His colleague, Zeke, also addresses the importance of following the learning outcomes.

He has this to add:

The teachers are accountable to make sure that the students themselves are following all the learning outcomes that are outlined and to make sure that everything is applicable to the classroom.

For Zeke, it seems important that he and his students are both aware of the learning outcomes for the courses he teaches. He goes on to describe his particularly active teaching style incorporating multi-media presentation material and theatrics:

I write on the board. I use PowerPoint and overhead projectors. I'm very active, very theatrical. I use a lot of mime in my classroom. I demonstrate a lot to try and show them what's going on. I do a lot of role-playing. I get very involved. I want them to be very involved in the process, which is very learner-centered.

Zeke is very active in the classroom and uses his physical approach to teaching to capture the attention of his students and to encourage their involvement as well.

Another learner-centered strategy that Joshua shared was how he gives his students feedback on their in-class assessments. He believes that students benefit more when the feedback is provided quickly:

So, for my assessments, I always give them feedback right away. And when testing is over, when I give the grades back, I always give each individual feedback right away. I do that in a large group, like I give everyone, "Here's the right answer." And then everyone can see, "Oh, this is why I got that wrong."

And you can see them all understanding why they got certain questions wrong. I want them to understand what the right answer should be.

Finally, Zeke addresses the notion of teaching his students to think critically. For Zeke, critical thinking skills are essential for students to succeed in a learner-centered classroom environment:

I also want them to develop their own thinking strategies better. If a teacher just gives them the information and they study that and then where is their thinking

skill development coming in? Where is their cognitive development and all of that? I want them to actually, you know, have their mind working when they're learning. And if they can't figure it out one way, I want them to figure out a different strategy to get to the point. I have them emphasize it again and again so that it's about developing their thinking skills.

This section included an assortment of strategies and behaviors that the participants in my study believed to be representative of some of the learner-centered practices in their classrooms. While the incidence of occurrence for each of these strategies was comparatively low in relation to the other themes in this chapter, I felt that these concepts were worth reporting here. These behaviors included simple concepts like checking-in with students to gauge the mood of the class as well as writing the agenda on the board.

Other colleagues shared their practices of highlighting the learning outcomes that would be covered. In addition, some of the participants talked about their strategies for reviewing concepts from previous lectures. Finally, I shared how another colleague encouraged his students to develop critical thinking skills. For the participants in my study, even these seemingly simple behaviors helped to contribute to the learner-centered experience in their classrooms. In the next section, I will discuss the final theme from research question three, the belief that teachers do not have to be perfect.

Teachers as learners.

This section addressed the belief expressed by many of my colleagues that they view themselves as learners along with their students. This includes a belief that faculty members are not perfect, are capable of making mistakes, and that their journeys as

learners are ongoing. This view is in line with learner-centered and adult learning principles where a view of the individual as a life-long learner is key. In addition, when students view their teachers as fallible individuals and active learners who are participating in the education process with them, their perspective shifts and allows them to see their teachers in a different light.

Calvin addressed the idea that teachers are imperfect and can have off days just like students can:

When I'm in class and I don't understand my students, or if they sign something I don't understand I'll tell them, "I'm sorry, I don't understand that. I don't know what you meant. Maybe I'm having a bad day. Maybe I'm just not being able to pay attention." So the teachers have those kinds of days too.

This allows students to see that their teachers are human and capable of making mistakes or having times when things just do not click. When students see this characteristic in their teachers, it somehow makes them seem more approachable. His colleague, Bev shares a similar belief when she talks about her imperfections and that she is on a continual journey of learning:

One point I try to make is I'm not the god of ASL. I think you have to realize that you make a mistake or you don't do it as well. I think students need to think that too. You don't have to be perfect. You're probably not going to be perfect. But I always tell them I'm still learning. And also I think the Murguia Learning Institute on campus is another example of faculty members as lifetime learners. So that's something else...I want to be a lifetime learner. I don't feel like I know it all.

Here, we see the idea of teachers as capable of making errors and the idea that being a teacher does not mean that the learning process has stopped. This seems to be an important concept for my faculty colleagues to convey to their students. Zeke reiterates this idea of teachers as imperfect and that this allows for teachers and students to work together to create shared learning experiences:

I want to make sure that I don't look like that person that's perfect. I'm not a perfect person. I want them to realize it's us in this boat together. And I never think of myself as the teacher, and you need to pay attention to me, and I just don't see myself that way. It's a give and take. I want us all to enjoy class together. I want us to, you know, respect each other.

Diane also believes it is important to demonstrate to her students that she makes mistakes saying that it helps students to see her as human and therefore, more approachable. She offered:

Well, it shows that I'm human; it shows that we're the same. It shows that I make mistakes, even as they make mistakes. I don't want them to think I'm on a pedestal.

Dana continued with this theme and talked about how being honest with her students and letting them know when something is unfamiliar to her helped to encourage her students by emphasizing the shared nature of the learning experience. She offered:

I think one thing that kind of opens up the discussion in my class is if I don't know something about a particular topic, I tell them. And I think that if they can see that I'm being honest in this position, that perhaps this is something that I don't know or can look into I think that they can respect that but it also shows that

I'm still learning, I mean I tell them that all the time. I think it shows them again that it's safe to say, "I don't know about this either," I'm along there with my instructor but we'll find out together.

Alicia also shared the belief that teachers are learning along with their students, but she added the idea that her learning often comes from the students. She started by affirming that teachers are not perfect and then shared her belief about the collaborative learning experience. She had this to say:

I think the teacher has to believe that they don't know everything. I think that the teacher has to believe that they still have something to learn from their students. And I believe that the teacher should be inclusive of himself or herself when talking about certain concepts. So like using the word "we." As we approach this. Because again I think that the teacher has to be able to do the work with, alongside them. So that inclusion of "we" as we approach this.

Finally, Dana mentioned an additional benefit that students may derive from realizing that their faculty members are imperfect, engaged learners and that making mistakes are a part of every learning process. For Dana, this belief helps students have a more realistic view of their educational journey and may offer them encouragement along the way:

I think that they can really relate to that and it'll help them realize when they're actually working that it's okay to not be so hard on themselves. I also think it benefits them because they'll continue to pursue the upper level courses. It'll just motivate them to keep going through the program.

For Dana, students will feel more motivated to persist through the curriculum if they have a more realistic view of learning as an imperfect process and the assurance that their faculty members are with them in the process.

For the participants in my study the belief that they are life-long learners, complete with imperfections is an important part of being learner-centered educators. Allowing for mistakes as a normal part of the process helps them model for their students a more realistic perspective about the nature of learning. In addition, when faculty members demonstrate their own commitment to life-long learning, their students are more likely to view them as collaborators in the learning process rather than dispensers of knowledge.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I presented the relevant themes that I found during the analysis of the data from my study. I organized these themes around my three research questions. Research question one was designed to discern the meaning of learner-centeredness for my faculty colleagues in the Department of ASL/IT at SAC. What I learned from their responses is that few of them were able to articulate a specific definition for learner-centeredness. However, all of them were able to speak at length about what learner-centered practices looked like. This resulted in a great deal of overlap between the responses to research question one (the meaning of learner-centeredness) and the responses to research question three (what learner-centeredness looks like in the classroom). This is an important revelation, which I will explore in more detail in the next chapter.

Research question two was intended to extricate my colleagues' beliefs about where learner-centeredness comes from. There were five constructs that I discovered relative to this question. They are: 1) preparation as a teacher (this included both formal and informal study), 2) experiences as a learner (both positive and negative), 3) institution specific influences, 4) discipline specific influences, and 5) intrinsic influences. Some of these themes were also subjected to further analysis and discussion in the next chapter.

Finally, research question three attempted to identify what learner-centered behaviors looked like in the classroom. The themes that I found from the analysis of the data relevant to this question include: 1) teacher/student relationships, 2) psychological environment, 3) teacher behaviors, and 4) teachers as learners. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings of my study that are consistent with the literature on learner-centered education as well as offer my analysis of some of the more salient constructs that I found in the data and offer a unique perspective on learner-centeredness.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In the last chapter, I provided the salient themes and sub-themes that I uncovered during the analysis of the data from my study. In this chapter, I discuss in greater detail a selection of those salient themes. This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part consists of a comparison between the traditional teacher-centered and the learner-centered paradigms with an emphasis on five critical domains. This comparison and the five critical domains are based on current literature on learner-centeredness as well as my analysis of the data in this study. I include my own perspective on the significance of these findings.

The second part of this chapter includes select constructs that are unique contributions to the literature on learner-centered education. To address the first of these constructs, I introduce the High-Middle-Low (HML) model of theories and the concept of teacher theory in order to provide a context for this discussion. I then provide my perspective on why teacher theory is important and how it helps explain some of the findings of my study.

The third part includes a discussion of three field specific aspects of ASL and Deaf culture that reinforce learner-centered principles. The participants in my study described a range of learner-centered behaviors that may be positively influenced by aspects of ASL as a visual language and Deaf culture as a collectivist culture. As in the

first two parts of this chapter, I include my perspective on the significance of these findings.

Five Critical Domains

In examining the paradigm of learner-centeredness and comparing it to the more traditional model of teacher-centeredness, I have identified five critical domains that comprise the primary differences between the two. These critical domains are: 1) role, 2) relationship, 3) locus of control, 4) method of instruction, and 5) psychological environment. Each of these domains will be presented in tables comparing the two paradigms. A discussion will follow each of the five tables.

Table 3. Comparison of Teacher-centered and Learner-centered Role

	Teacher-centered	Learner-centered
Role	<p>Teacher is the dispenser of knowledge (Bogart, 2003; Papes, 1998).</p> <p>The teacher's role is to teach and provide the knowledge to the students (Robertson, 2005; Vertin, 2001; King, 2000; Atkinson, 1993).</p> <p>Students are receptacles to be filled (Ikuta, 2008; Bogart, 2003; Papes, 1998).</p>	<p>Teacher is a facilitator of learning (Weimer, 2002; Mino, 2004; D.M. Brown, 2003).</p> <p>Students are active participants in their own learning: (Ikuta, 2008; O'Banion, 1997; D.M. Brown, 2003; Egerton, 2007; Barrett, 2007; Grillos, 2007).</p>

In Table 3, it is clear that the role of both teachers and students differs significantly between the teacher-centered and the learner-centered paradigms. For learner-centered classrooms, the roles of teacher and student shift dramatically with teachers transitioning to a facilitator of learning and students taking on considerably more responsibility for their own learning. The participants in my study demonstrate an understanding of this shift in the teacher role when they talk about teachers as a resource,

teachers and students being on an equal plane, describing the teacher as a guide or facilitator, and suggesting that teachers should honor the students for who they are.

In addition, they express ideas like students make valuable contributions to the learning, students should be responsible for some decision-making, and students share the responsibility for constructing knowledge. These comments indicate a clear understanding of the shift in role that students must make in a learner-centered environment.

This shift in role for both teachers and students is the key component upon which the other critical domains depend. Without transforming the role of both the teacher and student in a learner-centered classroom, it seems unlikely that there would be a possibility of significant change in the teacher/student relationship, locus of control, method of instruction, or psychological environment.

Table 4. Comparison of Teacher-centered and Learner-centered Relationship

	Teacher-centered	Learner-centered
Relationship	<p>Teacher/student relationship is prescribed (K.L. Brown, 2003)</p> <p>The relationship is directed by the teacher (Anton, 1999; K.L. Brown, 2003).</p> <p>The relationship is intended to preserve teacher authority and control (Weimer, 2002).</p>	<p>Teacher seeks to build a relationship with students (D.M. Brown, 2003; McNeil, 2006).</p> <p>The relationship facilitates student learning (Rossi, 2010).</p>

Table 4 highlights the differences in the teacher/student relationship between the teacher-centered and learner-centered paradigms. In learner-centered classrooms, the teacher/student relationship is critical. In contrast to the teacher-centered classroom where the relationship between teacher and student is limited and designed to maintain

control for the teacher, the learner-centered classroom fosters a teacher/student relationship that is based more on mutual respect and equality. The participants in my study used language like equity, treating students fairly, and building rapport to describe the relationship between teacher and students.

When teachers work to build a positive relationship with their students the climate in the classroom is able to shift. Students are more willing to contribute to the construction of knowledge, are more engaged, and are more open to error correction, which is especially important when learning a second language. In general, teachers observe positive changes in their students when they work to develop rapport. Participants in my study support this claim when they talk about how their relationship with students results in an increase in students' comfort level, more questions from students, better student engagement, and performance. In general, teachers and students both benefit when the teacher is seen as more accessible and works to empower students.

Table 5. Comparison of Teacher-centered and Learner-centered Locus of Control

	Teacher-centered	Learner-centered
Locus of control	<p>Teacher has all the power:</p> <p>The teacher is viewed as the main agent of authority in the teacher-centered classroom (Barrett, et al., 2007; Atkinson, 1993).</p> <p>The teacher's success is measured based on their ability to deliver the curriculum (King, 2000).</p> <p>Teacher makes all the classroom decisions:</p> <p>Teacher determines method of assessment (Atkinson, 1993).</p>	<p>Teacher shares power and decision-making (Weimer, 2002; Stolt-Krichko, 1997).</p> <p>Teacher establishes high expectations (Dunn, 2008; Grillos, 2007; King, 2000; B. L. McCombs, 1997; Schrenko, 1994).</p> <p>Student assumes greater responsibility for their learning (Atkinson, 1993; K.L. Brown, 2003; Conti, 1978; Grillos, 2007; McNeill, 2006; Weimer, 2002).</p> <p>Students have more control over learning (Vega & Taylor, 2005).</p>

Table 5 continued.

	Teacher-centered	Learner-centered
	Teacher determines learning objectives and method of instruction (Reese, 1993; K.L. Brown, 2003).	<p>Students become active learners (D.M. Brown, 2003; Egerton, 2007).</p> <p>Students construct their own knowledge (D.M. Brown, 2003; Vertin, 2001; Egerton, 2007).</p> <p>Students are more engaged (Henson, 2003)</p> <p>Students develop critical thinking skills (Dunn, 2008; Vertin, 2001; Vega and Taylor, 2005; Grillos, 2007; Egerton, 2007).</p>

Table 5 addresses the concept of locus of control and compares this critical domain for the teacher-centered and learner-centered paradigms. In teacher-centered classrooms, the teacher maintains all of the authority. Students have little, if any, say in how the classroom is managed, how the curriculum is delivered, or how they are expected to demonstrate mastery of the concepts. This is in stark contrast to a learner-centered classroom where authority and decision-making are more evenly distributed.

There are several benefits, identified in the literature and confirmed in my study, that occur when students are given more autonomy in a learner-centered classroom. These include things like the students demonstrating more active learning, students constructing knowledge for themselves, a greater degree of student engagement and increased critical thinking. The participants in my study seemed to confirm many of these perceived benefits. They describe the shift in locus of control as contributing to student success when they talk about how students feel more comfortable, students take on more responsibility for their learning, and students are more motivated and engaged.

When students feel like they have more of a voice and that their teachers value their input there is a greater degree of buy in from students. Teachers find that sharing the authority in a learner-centered classroom is beneficial for both the teacher and the students. Allowing the students more control over their own learning creates an atmosphere where students can maximize their potential as self-directed learners and where teachers become learners along with their students.

Table 6. Comparison of Teacher-centered and Learner-centered Method of Instruction

	Teacher-centered	Learner-centered
Method of instruction	<p>Method of instruction is primarily lecture (Mino, 2000; Barrett, et al., 2007; Bouton, 2008; K.L. Brown, 2003).</p> <p>Lecture leads to students taking a passive role (Bouton, 2008).</p> <p>Students' participation is of minimal importance (Grillos, 2007).</p> <p>Little or no consideration for students' diverse learning needs (Reese, 1993; Atkinson, 1993).</p>	<p>Method of instruction does not emphasize lecture: (D.M. Brown, 2003).</p> <p>Students work collaboratively with the teacher (Thompson, et al., 2003; Heise and Himes, 2010).</p> <p>Students work collaboratively with their peers (Heise and Himes, 2010).</p> <p>Students develop relevance for their work (Henson, 2003).</p> <p>Diversity is valued (Henson, 2003).</p> <p>Diverse learning styles are accommodated (Egerton, 2007; D.M. Brown, 2003; McNeill, 2006; McCombs, 1997; Grillos, 2007).</p>

Method of instruction is the next critical domain for discussion. As shown in Table 6, lecture is the primary, if not the only, method of instruction in the teacher-centered classroom. This relegates students to a completely passive role. This is in stark contrast to the learner-centered classroom where lecture may still be used but there is also an emphasis on active learning, which accommodates diverse learning needs and

encourages collaboration. Learner-centered classrooms utilize a variety of methods of instruction. This is beneficial because it encourages collaboration, helps to develop relevance for students and supports the diverse learning needs of students in the classroom.

The participants in my study value collaborative learning. They addressed both the idea of teachers collaborating with students as well as students working with each other. Comments like relying on everybody, the teacher being part of the mix, using the word “we”, and teaming up with students on specific assignments demonstrate their support of collaboration between teachers and students. In addition, they cited examples of pair practice in the language classes, small group activities, round table discussions and collaborative research projects as examples of students working with each other.

They also addressed the idea that having a variety of methods of instruction creates an environment where students can build relevance for the concepts they are learning. Some of the examples offered included application exercises in the classroom as well as the use of personal stories to underscore how course content is related to their future work as ASL/English interpreters. Other examples came from the students themselves sharing their own experiences that helped to reinforce course content.

The participants in my study also shared their understanding that everybody learns differently and teachers need to accommodate these differences. Some of them specifically addressed their awareness of visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners. But they also talked about the diversity of learners in the classroom as being beneficial. Students are able to learn from each other and appreciate the strengths that can be derived from their individual differences.

When faculty members are open to methods of instruction other than lecture, their students experience a variety of benefits. But, teachers benefit as well. The participants in my study talked about the exhilaration they felt in teaching and the freedom of not lecturing from the same lecture notes or slide presentations semester after semester. They also talked about the synergy that happens when they capitalize on what everyone in the classroom brings to the table.

Table 7. Comparison of Teacher-centered and Learner-centered Psychological Environment

	Teacher-centered	Learner-centered
Psychological environment	Not a consideration	Psychological environment is critical (K.L. Brown, 2003; Henson, 2003; McCombs, 1997; McNeill, 2006). Addresses the anxiety in second language settings (Mougel, 1998). Fosters a safe learning environment (Mino, 2004).

Finally, Table 7 talks about the critical domain of psychological environment. For teacher-centered classrooms, the psychological environment is not an important consideration. In contrast, learner-centered classrooms place a great deal of emphasis on creating a psychological environment conducive to learning. The participants in my study addressed the benefit of creating a safe and comfortable space for student learning. They used terms like *feeling comfortable* and *safe environment*, and emphasized these as concepts that extend beyond individual classrooms to include the entire department. They referenced the fact that students felt less anxiety in using their second language and were

more amenable to error correction because of the comfort level they felt with their peers and their teachers.

Changes across the five critical domains of role, relationship, locus of control, method of instruction, and psychological environment are essential for learner-centeredness to occur. It seems likely that, taken together, these components create a cumulative effect to enhance student learning. It also seems logical that the most important of these changes is the shift in role for both teachers and students. It is the willingness to approach teaching and learning in a new way that makes the other critical domains worthwhile and even possible.

In the next section, I discuss some of the constructs from my study that are unique contributions to the literature on learner-centeredness. I address the relationships between the responses to the three research questions and how these relationships are relevant to teacher theory.

Figure 1 represents the relationships among the three research questions for my study. The research questions were:

- 1) What do faculty members believe is the meaning of learner-centeredness?
- 2) What influences do they believe shaped their understanding of learner-centered teaching?
- 3) How do they believe they apply learner-centered practices in their classroom?

Teacher Theory

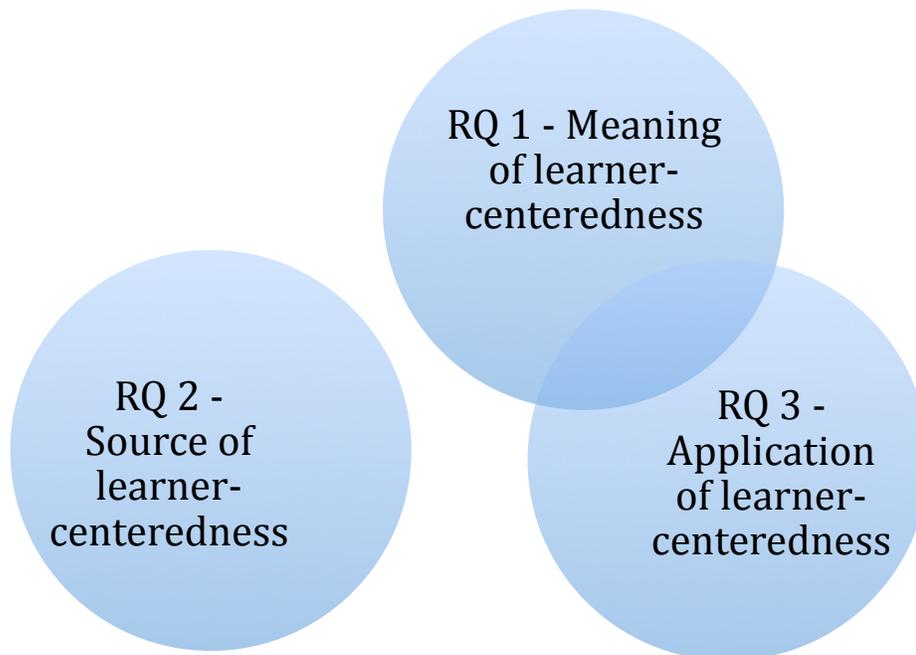


Figure 1. Relationship Among the Responses to the Three Research Questions

The overlap between the responses to research questions one and three holds a specific significance. The lack of overlap between the responses to research question two and the other questions is similarly significant. Finally, these two issues, overlap and lack of overlap, are related. In the next section I will explain how I came to this conclusion.

As I mentioned in chapter four, the participants in my study struggled with articulating a specific definition of learner-centered instruction. Those who were able to propose a definition made use of hedging language such as, “I think it requires people to focus on students”, “I think with learner-centeredness, the teachers and the students are on an equal plane”, “My understanding is to take what the students have already acquired as a starting point”, “That’s kind of what I think of in terms of learner-centeredness”. By

using words like “I think” and “My understanding”, they are remaining non-committal to a formal definition of the term, indicating a degree of uncertainty in their response.

Rather than give a definition that might be inadequate, most of the participants resorted to describing what learner-centeredness looks like. The use of descriptions instead of an actual definition is what contributes to the overlap between research questions one and three.

How do I account for the difficulty my colleagues faced in providing a definition for learner-centered theory as well as a lack of confidence in the definition that was provided? What about their inclination to describe learner-centered behaviors in lieu of articulating a formal definition? My interpretation is that my faculty colleagues have not had formal instruction in learner-centeredness as a theory of teaching. Instead, they are relying on their own experiences in the classroom to unravel the meaning of learner-centeredness.

This makes sense when you consider where knowledge about learner-centeredness would come from. It seems reasonable that individuals with formal education in learner-centered principles would have no difficulty expressing a definition of learner-centeredness. But for many faculty members, including my colleagues and me, the only prerequisite for our introduction to the classroom is technical proficiency as practitioners. That many college educators have no formal preparation as faculty members is well documented (Bouton, 2008; Thompson, et al., 2003).

For most of us, when we find ourselves recruited into a faculty position, we learn our teaching role on the job through a system of trial and error. The participants in my study support this claim when they describe their journey as college educators. Several of

them talked about learning what works and does not work as they experiment with their teaching. Another participant acknowledges that he believes himself to be a competent educator but he is not sure where that came from or how it happened. One participant admits that she was not an effective educator in her first couple of years but through reflection and gut instinct, she was able to adapt her teaching. Another colleague claimed that he “didn’t know he had it in him”.

So, how do faculty members come to an understanding of what it means to be learner-centered? Where do they learn to model learner-centered teaching in their classrooms? To answer these questions I need to provide a context for theory in general and about teacher theory specifically.

Griffee (2012) provides a manageable explanation of the general types of theories when he describes a model called the High-Middle-Low, (HML) model of theories. According to Griffee, theories are classified as one of these three types; high, middle, or low. In addition, each of these three levels of theories can be further categorized into either public or private. The terms public and private basically refer to how readily available the theory may be. For example, public theory is documented, publicized, and may be widely distributed while private theory is only known to the individual theorist or a select group of insiders (Griffee, 2012). It stands to reason that private theory can become public theory when the information is published or otherwise widely disseminated. In the next few paragraphs, I elaborate on the HML model of theories and include the definitions of each of the three categories.

High theory, according to Griffee (2012), is described as theory that extends across several disciplines and offers a “basic orientation to life” (p. 46). Davis (1995)

uses the term *grand theory* to describe the same construct. Griffée suggests that the theory of capitalism proposed by Karl Marx or Albert Einstein's theories are examples of what might be considered high theory. There is a certain quality of separation from the average person's everyday existence and the magnitude of high theories. He offers, for example, that many of us have heard of these theories but unless we have specific need to study these concepts in-depth, they probably exist somewhere in our periphery of knowledge (Griffée, 2012).

Middle theory is described as content or domain theory (Griffée, 2012). The term *domain* here refers to a specific area suitable for investigation. Examples of domains from the field of second language acquisition would include tasks like listening or speaking. Griffée goes on to say that when researchers write a review of the literature on some topic, they are accessing middle public theory, which is also known as middle-range theory (Davis, 1995). An example of middle private theory might be an unpublished dissertation or some theory still being refined (Griffée, 2012). One distinction between high theory and middle theory is the relative accessibility of the information. Unlike high theory, middle theory is generally more accessible to and understood by a wider segment of the population (Griffée, 2012).

Low theory is loosely described as concepts or ideas that are not fully recognized as theory (Griffée, 2012). An example of low public theory would be poster presentations at a professional conference. These are considered published but typically are not given the same consideration as more developed or publicized theory (Griffée, 2012). Low private theory is described as "implicit theory" generated by individual practitioners who

may or may not even recognize their ideas as theory. A perfect example of low private theory would be teacher theory, which can help inform the discussion of my findings.

Now that I have provided a suitable context for situating teacher theory within the overarching framework of theory categories in the HML theory model, let me explain more about teacher theory, and its relation to domain theory.

Historically, there has been a separation between domain theory, originating from those who create theory for a living, and teacher theory, generated by practitioners in the classroom. Remember, domain theory that has been published is categorized as middle-public theory in the HML theory model while teacher theory falls into the low-private category. Because of the perceived lack of parity between professional domain theorists (those who research about education) and professional practitioners (those who teach) teacher theory has been viewed as less valuable or lacking in legitimacy (Clarke, 1994). The sentiment seems to go both directions with teachers believing there is “little connection between scholarly speculation and teachers’ lives” (Clarke, 1994, p. 10).

Griffiee (2012) thinks the disconnect can partially be explained by the fact that teachers do not always recognize their contributions, personal values, or life experiences as valid foundations for generating theory. Gorsuch (2012) uses the term *local teacher theory* to refer to the same construct and states that even though it “encompasses what teachers know and the setting in which they know it” teacher theory is frequently implicit and is not discussed (p. 426). Consequently, the creators of low private theory are considered less knowledgeable than their domain theory generating counterparts (Clarke, 1994; Gorsuch, 2012).

However, theory should not be considered something that is reserved for researchers or inaccessible to teachers. Griffiee and Gorsuch (1999), describe theory as simply a way to explain our observations. Teacher theory, by extension, is simply the way teachers attempt to explain their observations of experiences in the classroom. Teachers encounter and make use of theory everyday on the job. Wilkinson (2005) states that all of the decisions we make as teachers are grounded in theory. Johnson (1996), elaborates by saying that teachers must determine what to do with a variety of topics, for a given audience, in a specific time and place.

Teacher theory also stems from personal experience (Clarke, 1994; Johnson, 1996). Griffiee (2012) believes that teacher theory “is forged by the exposure a teacher receives in various classrooms with various types of students at various institutions” (p. 50). Furthermore, he defines exposure as past experiences as either a student or a teacher, in staff development, or by self study or reading in the field (Griffiee, 2012). All of these are examples of teachers legitimately theorizing about their practice.

Therefore, the gap that exists between domain theory and teacher theory is not only counterproductive, it is unwarranted. Clarke (1994) believes that we should lend more credence to the knowledge and experience behind teacher theory stating that “teachers constitute the fulcrum of educational reform” (p. 10). Griffiee (2012) argues that teacher theory creation is normal and a worthwhile part of teacher development while Gorsuch (2012) states that the tangible benefits of teachers’ theorizing are teaching materials and course development. So if we can accept the idea of teachers as theorists, how does this relate to the discussion of my findings?

Griffiee's HML model of theories can help explain why the participants in my study are able to describe in great detail their learner-centered practices but, in general, were not able to articulate a concise definition of learner-centered theory nor clearly explain where their learner-centeredness comes from. Griffiee (2012) states that teacher beliefs, personal values, and classroom experiences are all considered part of low private theory. Furthermore, he posits that at best there is only a weak connection between these beliefs, values, and experiences and a teacher's ability to articulate their teaching philosophy (Griffiee, 2012).

While a preponderance of the data indicate that the participants in my study have a firm grasp of learner-centered behaviors, most of them seemed unsure about how to define what learner-centeredness means. The beginning of this section addressed the use of hedging language like "I think" and "My understanding" which indicates indecisiveness in defining the term. Griffiee's concept of teacher theory can help explain this disconnect between my colleagues' seemingly thorough understanding of learner-centered behaviors but relative inability to articulate a definition for the term.

There were also varied opinions about where they had acquired their learner-centered philosophy. Some of the participants in my study indicated that learner-centeredness is something that you're born with. They made statements like, "it's just in your blood" and "it's got to be something that you're born with". Other participants stated a belief that learner-centeredness is "intuitive" or it comes from "gut instinct". Still others suggested that learner-centeredness "comes naturally" or is based in "common sense". A few of my colleagues believed that learner-centeredness is partially innate but that it is also learnable. Many of them spoke of learning their learner-centered behaviors

through “trial and error”. Teacher theory can also explain this scenario since it proposes that teacher’s experiences are the source of the theory they generate.

My colleagues are able to demonstrate an understanding of learner-centered practices because of their lived experiences with a variety of students, in different situational contexts, over multiple semesters. In essence, they have created for themselves the theory upon which all of their decisions in the classroom are based. Perhaps Griffiee (2012) said it best, “Because teacher theory is based on experience, it can be communicated by experience” (p. 51). When the participants in my study shared with me their beliefs about the meaning of learner-centeredness, where learner-centeredness comes from and what learner-centered practices look like in their classrooms, this is exactly what they were doing, communicating their experience.

Field Specific Aspects of ASL and Deaf Culture

For my study, however, teacher theory may offer only a partial explanation for how faculty members learn to be learner-centered. The data also suggest the likelihood that ASL and Deaf culture have inherent qualities that may lead to learner-centered behaviors. I did encounter several examples in the general literature on learner-centeredness where various studies made reference to discipline specific influences affecting learner-centeredness. However, these were always references in the negative, i.e. “learner-centeredness will not work in chemistry because I have too much content to cover”. The responses from participants in my study suggest that there may be characteristics of ASL and Deaf culture that positively influence learner-centered principles. In this section I will address three *field specific* influences that I find in the

data, suggesting that ASL and Deaf Culture may actually support a learner-centered paradigm.

The first observation pointed out by the participants in my study is that the visual nature of ASL requires eye contact before communication can happen. When the language of instruction is a visual language, like ASL, students must have eye contact with their teachers in order to access the lecture. This already establishes a dynamic in the classroom different than when the lecture is delivered orally. One participant referenced how in Math or English, you may be able to make an A and never engage with the teacher. In contrast, the visual nature of ASL requires a connection to happen, before communication between a teacher and a student or among students is possible.

My colleagues addressed this construct when they talked about simple things like how the classroom is set up. Every classroom in the ASL/IT department at SAC is arranged with the tables and chairs in a U-shape so that all of the students can see each other as well as have a clear line of sight to the instructor. Support of this idea can be found in comments like “our classes are unique in that everybody can see everybody” and “If you’re not looking at somebody, you’re not talking to them”.

Next, Deaf culture is a collectivist culture and as such, emphasizes the importance of making personal connections with individuals (Mindess, 1999). This lends support to a learner-centered paradigm for faculty members who are Deaf or who are hearing but familiar with Deaf culture. One colleague specifically addresses the idea that because of the collectivist nature of Deaf culture, individuals seek to establish a connection and build rapport. Their words were, “You can’t have a disconnect. You know, you’ve got to have that intimacy kind of relationship”. This is a cultural belief that would serve to reinforce a

shared value with learner-centeredness, i.e. the importance of relationship in a learner-centered classroom.

Finally, the naming convention common in Deaf culture may influence the degree of familiarity that students feel with their teachers. Deaf culture makes use of both arbitrary and descriptive name signs. Descriptive name signs are usually based on some physical characteristic of the individual (Mindess, 1999). Arbitrary name signs typically are based on an individual's name and include "a handshape representing an initial of the person's English name" (Mindess, 1999, p. 105). All of the participants in my study have arbitrary name signs that are based on either their first, last, or a combination of first and last names. Calling a faculty member by their name rather than using a more formal title serves to make the faculty member seem like an equal, a learner-centered concept. One participant talked about her experiences as a student in the ASL/IT department recalling that this was the first time she was ever encouraged to address a teacher by their first name.

It seems plausible that these three *field specific* influences found in ASL and Deaf culture may encourage learner-centered behaviors from the faculty members in my study. The fact that ASL is a visual language and requires eye contact, that the collectivist nature of Deaf culture reinforces the importance of relationship, and that the naming conventions common in Deaf culture lead to familiarity, serve to reinforce principles of learner-centeredness.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I provided a discussion of select themes from my study. I began with a comparison of teacher-centered and learner-centered characteristics across five critical domains that I uncover in the data. These domains are: 1) role, 2) relationship, 3) locus of control, 4) method of instruction, and 5) psychological environment. I briefly discussed how each of these domains contributes to learner-centered theory and supported my interpretation of their significance using statements from my faculty colleagues.

Next, I provided a visual representation of the relationship among the responses to the research questions in my study. I then outlined the HML theory of models, including teacher theory and showed how teacher theory explains this relationship. This includes the ability of the participants in my study to describe learner-centeredness in terms of behaviors and their relative inability to offer a concise definition of the term.

Finally, I discussed three field specific influences unique to ASL and Deaf culture that contribute to a learner-centered paradigm. These included the visual nature of ASL, Deaf culture as a collectivist culture, and naming conventions in Deaf culture. In the next chapter, I will summarize my study design, discuss the implications of my study, offer my recommendations for future research and provide my final thoughts about my study.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I summarized the findings of my study and discuss the implications of those findings for theorists, policymakers, and practitioners. In addition, I provide recommendations for further research. Finally, I offer my concluding thoughts on the study.

American Sign Language/English interpreters find themselves in an incredibly demanding field. Becoming bilingual and then mastering the skills necessary to work across two languages is difficult and often anxiety provoking. Because of its emphasis on creating a safe psychological environment, learner-centered education may be especially beneficial. A majority of programs for students of American Sign Language/English interpreting are in community colleges. Some of the challenges that many community college students face, which may be better served in learner-centered settings include:

- 1) Being underprepared for college
- 2) Being described as First Time in College (FTIC)
- 3) Being described as non-traditional
- 4) Managing outside responsibilities like jobs and families

Learner-centered practices have been shown to be effective in accommodating the challenges that many community college students face, leading to greater student success and increased retention (Reese, 1994; Thompson, et al., 2003).

Summary of Findings

Learner-centered education has been proposed as a theory of teaching suitable for addressing the diverse needs of today's college students. However, it is generally understood that many college faculty members have little formal preparation in education and must acquire their teaching expertise on the job (Bouton, 2008; Thompson, et al., 2003). Many educators find themselves learning the teaching role through trial and error. While this can be effective, it is also time-consuming and for many educators, this can be a daunting task. The findings of my study could streamline the developmental process for educators who wish to incorporate learner-centered practices as part of their teaching.

During the analysis of the data, I identified five critical domains where significant changes must be made in order to create a learner-centered environment. These domains and the necessary changes, outlined and explained in detail in chapter five, have been listed here.

- 1) Role
 - a. Teacher is a facilitator of learning
 - b. Students are active participants in their own learning
- 2) Relationship
 - a. Teachers seek to build a relationship with students
 - b. The relationship facilitates student learning
- 3) Locus of control
 - a. Teacher shares power and decision making
 - b. Teacher establishes high expectations
 - c. Student assumes greater responsibility for their learning

- d. Students have more control over learning
- e. Students become active learners
- f. Students construct their own knowledge
- g. Students are more engaged
- h. Students develop critical thinking skills

4) Method of instruction

- a. Method of instruction does not emphasize lecture
- b. Students work collaboratively with the teacher
- c. Students work collaboratively with their peers
- d. Students develop relevance for their work
- e. Diversity is valued
- f. Diverse learning styles are accommodated

5) Psychological environment

- a. Psychological environment is critical
- b. Addresses the anxiety in second language settings
- c. Fosters a safe learning environment

Educators wishing to adopt learner-centeredness as part of their practical approach to teaching could work to incorporate the changes suggested across these five critical domains.

In addition, the experiences shared by the faculty members in my study may inform the process for other faculty members who wish to adopt learner-centered behaviors. In my analysis of the data, I discovered a variety of teacher behaviors found in

learner-centered environments. These behaviors are discussed in chapter four but have been listed here.

- 1) Making learning fun
- 2) Providing collaborative learning activities
- 3) Encouraging students
- 4) Adapting to students' needs
- 5) Making learning relevant
- 6) Other learner-centered behaviors
 - a. Checking in
 - b. Reviewing previous material
 - c. Writing the agenda on the board
 - d. Making learning outcomes explicit
 - e. Using an active teaching style
 - f. Providing prompt feedback
 - g. Encouraging critical thinking

This list of behaviors can serve as a guide that educators might follow in order to model learner-centered behaviors in their classrooms.

Implications for Theory

Griffiee (2012) suggests that there is a gap between theory generated by professional theorists and theory generated by educators also called, teacher theory. Both he and Gorsuch (2012) believe this gap is unnecessary and counterproductive.

Understanding more about teacher theory and how practitioners contribute to theory development, and especially recognizing theory that is considered low-private theory on

the High-Middle-Low model of theories, can contribute to the general body of knowledge about learner-centered education and specifically about learner-centeredness in the field of American Sign Language/English Interpreter Training. I uncovered the following themes from the discussion of the construct of teacher theory (Gorsuch, 2012; Griffiee, 2012; Griffiee & Gorsuch, 1999):

- 1) The experience and knowledge of teachers should be valued for their ability to generate teacher theory
- 2) Teacher theory creation is normal and worthwhile
- 3) Tangible benefits of teacher theory include teaching materials and course development

Each of the participants in my study spoke about how their experiences supported the evolution of their knowledge related to learner-centered theory. The literature on learner-centered teaching does not help us understand where learner-centeredness comes from or how teachers learn to become learner-centered. This is a significant gap in our knowledge about the evolution of learner-centeredness. Teacher theory may help to answer this question. This study found that, in coming to an understanding of learner-centered teaching, my faculty colleagues went through a process of theory generation as they created meaning from their experiences in the classroom. This study contributes to learner-centered theory by explicitly describing learner-centered teacher behaviors that have resulted from faculty members' experiences in the classroom.

Based on this finding, one implication for theory would include encouraging faculty members to recognize the value in and share their experiences with others. This may add to the body of knowledge that informs the further development of the academic

discipline. One way that they might share their emergent theories with other professionals in the field is through presentations at conferences as well as publication in peer-reviewed journals. If faculty members are encouraged to share their process of coming to understand learner-centeredness, this may contribute to a more complete understanding of what it means to be learner-centered and how learner-centered theory develops.

Implications for Policymakers

In the current economic climate, funding for higher education continues to decline. In the interest of maximizing the dollars spent on post-secondary education, legislative bodies are requiring a greater degree of accountability from colleges and universities. Consequently, college administrators and faculty members at public institutions find themselves expected to accomplish more with less. The literature on learner-centered education describes its emphasis on student outcomes and how learner-centeredness can increase student engagement and rates of retention, common performance measures scrutinized by funding sources.

However, this study found that faculty members in the Department of American Sign Language/Interpreter Training were not able to provide a definition for learner-centered teaching theory. They also were not able to explain completely how they had learned to be learner-centered educators. In short, while they were able to demonstrate learner-centered practices in their classes, they lacked the meta-awareness of formal learner-centered theory. Based on this finding, one implication for policymakers would be to develop specific training in learner-centered theory to address this potential knowledge gap for faculty members.

Human resource departments or other entities responsible for faculty development should offer specific training to faculty members who wish to incorporate learner-centered practices in their teaching. Understanding the challenges faced by faculty members and the processes that faculty members go through as they learn to incorporate learner-centered practices could facilitate both formal faculty development as well as self-study. Anyone engaged in efforts to write curriculum for faculty development may wish consider these themes that I identified during the analysis of the data in this study.

- 1) Faculty members were not always able to define learner-centeredness
- 2) Even with formal coursework in teaching strategies, faculty members were not always aware that learner-centeredness existed or that learner-centeredness is what was being modeled
- 3) While many of the participants in this study stated a belief that learner-centeredness was an innate skill, they all acknowledged that learner-centeredness could be learned

Implications for Practice

The participants in my study expressed a belief that learner-centered education is effective for students of American Sign Language/English Interpreter Training. Specifically they addressed how learner-centered education is useful in reducing anxiety in a second language setting and how it contributes to an atmosphere conducive to error correction. Based on this finding, practitioners engaged in American Sign Language/English Interpreter Training should adopt learner-centered strategies to reduce anxiety in second language classrooms.

The participants in my study also expressed a belief in the efficacy of collaborative learning, which included students working with faculty members as well as students working in groups and in pairs. Based on this finding, practitioners engaged in American Sign Language/English Interpreter Training should incorporate multiple options for collaborative learning in their courses.

In addition, my colleagues discussed their belief in the importance of fostering positive teacher/student relationships and, by extension, creating a welcoming and safe psychological environment in the classroom. Based on this finding, practitioners engaged in American Sign Language/English Interpreter Training should focus on building a positive relationship with their students and attempt to create the type of psychological environment in the classroom conducive to learning.

Finally, the participants in my study shared how learner-centered behaviors may be beneficial in meeting the diverse needs of a broad spectrum of students outside of the field of American Sign Language/English Interpreter Training. They spoke specifically about the ability of learner-centered education to accommodate the learning needs of a diverse student population. This includes the ability to address multiple learning styles. Based on this finding, educators in other disciplines should consider adopting learner-centered teaching practices in their classrooms.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study did not establish whether or not teachers' negative experiences as learners contributed to their development of learner-centered teaching strategies. More than one participant in my study mentioned having negative experiences as students that they believe continue to influence their learner-centered teaching today. This is a

construct worthy of further consideration because we do not fully understand what role these negative influences play in becoming a learner-centered faculty member.

Another question that was raised during the course of this study is whether or not a teacher's experience of marginalization as a learner may influence learner-centered behaviors. Although the question was not specifically investigated in this study, more than one participant raised the possibility that experiences as a member of a marginalized population may influence a teacher's capacity for learner-centeredness.

The source of the marginalization could be gender, ethnicity, hearing status, or sexual orientation or some other factor(s). When I think about the specific demographics of the participants in my study, there were no individuals who could be categorized as a hearing, white, male, heterosexual (the least marginalized combination of factors). I certainly do not have data to suggest a link between learner-centered characteristics and marginalized individuals. It is however, something worthy of further investigation that was initiated by my faculty colleagues in this study and would help to address the gap in the literature related to extrinsic influences in the development of learner-centeredness.

Finally, this study looked at faculty members' perceptions about learner-centered education. It would be beneficial to understand learner-centeredness from the perspective of students as well. While the participants in my study discussed at length their beliefs about how learner-centeredness is effective in addressing many of the needs of their students, we do not know enough about students' experiences in learner-centered classrooms. This knowledge would be useful for faculty members interested in creating a learner-centered environment in their classes.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this study is that only faculty members' perspectives were included. There was no input from students. While the data reveal an engaging story about faculty members' perceptions relative to learner-centeredness, the story is one-sided. A more thorough understanding may have been possible if there had been significant input from students in the Department of American Sign Language/Interpreter Training at San Antonio College.

In addition, I conducted this research with my faculty colleagues in the Department of American Sign Language and Interpreter Training at San Antonio College. I cannot overlook what my position as an insider may have had on the outcomes of the study. I was acutely aware of my dual role as faculty member and researcher during this study. Awareness of the potential for conflict because of this duality in my role was essential in order to reduce any bias during the collection and interpretation of the data.

While I made every effort to put my colleagues at ease during the interview process, there may have been instances when responses to my questions were influenced by what the participants thought I wanted them to say. I continually assured my colleagues that I was primarily interested in their opinions and that I had no preconceived ideas about what constituted a right or wrong answer. I also made use of member checks so that participants had the opportunity to confirm exactly what they were trying to convey during the interviews.

Another limitation of this study resulted from the fact that interviews with Deaf faculty members were conducted in American Sign Language and then interpreted into English prior to the data coding process. While this was a necessary step, it did add an

additional layer of interpretation prior to the analysis of the data. The reader needs to be aware of the potential effects of the *interpreter as instrument* in this process. While professional interpreters are acutely aware of preserving as accurate a message as possible, any interpreted message is subject to influences from the interpreter.

Concluding Thoughts

The field of American Sign Language/English Interpreter Training is an evolving discipline and there is still much to learn about best practices in American Sign Language/English interpreter education. Learner-centered education is an approach to teaching that can address the challenges faced by policymakers, faculty members, and students. The purpose of my study was to investigate the meaning of learner-centeredness for the faculty members in the Department of American Sign Language/Interpreter Training at San Antonio College. A more thorough understanding of what it means to be learner-centered, the influences that contribute to learner-centeredness, and how learner-centeredness is modeled in the classroom may benefit multiple stakeholders.

APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Research Question 1 – What do you believe is the meaning of learner-centeredness?

Interview 1 of 3 – Objective: Understand what _____ believes about what it means to have a learner-centered approach to teaching.

Interview Questions

1. Describe for me what learner-centeredness means in your understanding of the term.
2. What do you know about the college's initiative regarding learner-centered instruction, i.e. the Murguia Learning Institute?
3. What is your opinion about the college's initiative regarding learner-centered instruction?
4. How would you define learner-centered teaching?
5. What do you think are important beliefs for learner-centered instructors to hold?
6. What do you think are important beliefs for students to hold in relation to learner-centered instruction?
7. How would you describe the relationship between teachers and students in a learner-centered classroom?

8. How would you characterize your own approach to teaching in relation to learner-centered principles?
9. If you were trying to help another teacher become learner-centered, what would you tell them?
10. What do you think that I should have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

Research Question 2 – What influences do you believe shaped your understanding of learner-centered teaching?

Interview 2 of 3 – Objective: Understand what influences have shaped _____ beliefs about a learner-centered approach to teaching.

Interview Questions

Participants Experiences as a Learner

1. Share with me what it was like for you being a student.
2. Tell me what you remember about any particular teacher from your past that had a positive influence on you? (How, what did they do?)
3. Describe a teacher from your past that you believe was learner-centered.
4. Tell me what you remember about any particular teacher from your past that had a negative influence on you? (How, what did they do?)
5. Describe a teacher from your past that you believe was NOT learner-centered.
6. How would you describe the ways in which you learn best?
7. Describe a situation where you felt your learning was particularly effective.

8. Describe a situation where you felt your learning was particularly ineffective.
9. What do you think that I should have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

Participants Experiences as a Teacher

1. How did you become a teacher?
2. Whether your career path to becoming a teacher was planned or unplanned, how did it unfold?
3. What education did you pursue relevant to teaching?
4. What experiences outside of formal education contribute to your teaching expertise?
5. Tell me how you got into the field of ASL/IT. Why this field (ASL/IT) as opposed to some other option?
6. How/Where did you first become familiar with learner-centered teaching?
7. What would you tell another teacher who wished to become learner-centered?
8. What do you think that I should have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

Research Question 3 – How do you believe you apply learner-centered practices in your classroom?

Interview 3 of 3 – Objective: Understand what _____ believes are evidence of learner-centered practices in their classroom/teaching.

Interview Questions

1. How would you characterize learner-centered teaching approaches with regards to your own teaching?
2. Describe for me how learner-centeredness is apparent in your classroom.
3. What would your students say about your use of learner-centered practices in the classroom?
4. What do you want your students to remember about how you applied learner-centered principles in their classes?
5. What do you believe is learner-centered about how your syllabus is structured?
6. What do you believe is learner-centered about your approach to assessment in your classes?
7. What do you think that I should have asked you that I didn't think to ask?

APPENDIX B

Demographic Information Form

Name: _____

Pseudonym preference: _____

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Hearing Status: _____

How many years have you been teaching (any subject matter)? _____

How many years have you been teaching in this field (ASL/IT)? _____

How many years have you been teaching at this institution? _____

Education: (list all degrees held)

Institution	Degree Held	Year Awarded

What certifications do you have related to ASL/IT (NAD, ASLTA, BEI, RID, TASC-ASL, etc.)?

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VITA

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Tom began a career as a freelance ASL/English interpreter soon after moving to Austin, Texas in 1983. After 19 years of on-again, off-again college attendance at various institutions, he graduated in August of 1999 with a Bachelor of General Studies from Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. He completed a Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics in May of 2001, also from Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. He began his teaching career at San Antonio College that same year. In August of 2004, he began the PhD program in Adult, Professional, and Community Education at Texas State University-San Marcos.

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