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LEARNING PREFERENCES OF A DIVERSE GROUP OF COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A Thesis in Adult Education

by

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## ABSTRACT

The student population on college campuses has been evolving to include larger numbers of adult students. Some researchers and theorists contend that nontraditional students need to be taught differently from traditional-age college students utilizing a more independent, self-directed mode of instruction that takes their prior life and work experiences into account and that educators in higher education need to modify conditions to better serve nontraditional students. Researchers have suggested that the classroom experience is the focal point of the adult student's learning experience. Indeed, classrooms are spaces where learners make meaning of their experiences and ideas in multiple ways: through individual reflection on reading and/or lecture, through social interaction with facilitators and other learners, and through various experiential learning opportunities. Therefore, knowing the learning preferences of adult students and how they make meaning of their new learning experiences is important to adult educators.

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom. This qualitative social constructivist study extends the existing learning preferences literature by providing depth through interviews of participants, designed to learn of their preferences in their own words. It also provides insight into the reasons behind their stated preferences and the meaning of their new learning in light of both individual preferences and the social context of the higher education

classroom. A diverse group of students was selected in order to determine how learning preferences differ based on participants' positionality and to learn the meanings diverse students place on their classroom experiences from among those who have actually experienced a variety of teaching approaches in the higher education classroom. This study employed a qualitative social constructivist design to learn of adult students' learning preferences. The researcher conducted 18 individual interviews and 2 focus groups with a total of 12 students who were students or had recently been students in the business division of a community college. The data were analyzed inductively using the constant comparative method. There were four primary findings of the study reported in rich descriptive narratives that contain the students' own words related to (1) the importance of caring on the part of the instructor, (2) learning from the other students in the classroom, (3) the cultural relevance of the classroom experience, and (4) the preferences for interactive techniques. The results of this study are important in order to facilitate adult students' academic success as well as attract and retain them in college classrooms.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

We are living in a new millennium. It brings with it many changes in thinking brought about by the cultural changes of the latter half of the last century and the events surrounding the beginning of this one. Some of these include the changes brought about by the women's movement and the civil rights movement, altered demographics due to changes in immigration patterns, the development of more progressive technology, concern with security following the events of 9-11, and the concern of companies to be knowledge creating companies that can respond to the changing needs of a fast-paced world. All of these cultural changes in the world and the cultural milieu in the last 25 years have affected all societal institutions including higher education.

The student population on college campuses has been evolving to include larger numbers of adult students, those 25 years of age or older. The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reports that 39.12% of the college student population is comprised of these adult students. Forty-seven percent of community college students are adults (American Association of Community Colleges, 1997). At Reading Area Community College, which is the site of this study, adults comprise 46.87% of the student population (Reading Area Community College, 2004). Because of the increasing number of adults returning to college classrooms, educators involved in higher education are eager to determine what kind of environment these adult learners prefer. Some researchers and theorists contend that nontraditional students need to be taught

differently from traditional-age college students (Brookfield, 1987; Knowles, 1970). A recurring theme in the field of adult education is that adult students require a more independent, self-directed mode of instruction that takes their prior life and work experiences into account. Bendixen-Noe (1998) argues that educators in higher education need to modify conditions to better serve nontraditional students.

This idea of teaching adult students differently from younger students has traditionally been embodied in the concept of andragogy, which was first introduced into the field of adult education by Malcolm Knowles (1970). Brookfield (1987) defines andragogy as “a set of assumptions concerning adult learning processes from which we can derive a number of injunctions concerning appropriate teaching methods” (p. 120). Andragogy involves the belief that adults are more likely to be self-directed, motivated, responsible, and goal oriented than pre-adults (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Brookfield, 1987). Brookfield added that adults have diverse learning styles; they like learning outcomes to have some immediacy of application; they like to participate in the learning process; and they like a comfortable, supportive environment for successful learning. Knowles (1980) also recommends “a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers” (p. 87). Andragogy emphasizes the experiences of learners and the importance of learning building on learners’ experiences. In other words, implicit in andragogy is the idea that learners construct new knowledge in light of past experiences. Proponents of andragogy, such as Knowles, focus more on how the individual learner builds on past experiences. However, individuals generally build on their experiences by reflecting on those experiences, both

individually and socially, through dialogue with facilitators and other learners; thus, there is a social dimension to andragogy that has not been explored directly. Much of what enthusiasts of andragogy embrace, both its explicit individual dimensions and its implicit social dimensions, has not been thoroughly researched although many who teach adults will attest that there is considerable truth in these assumptions.

Researchers have suggested that the classroom experience is the focal point of the adult student's learning experience (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson, 1991; Kasworm, 1995; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Donaldson and Graham (1999) refer to the classroom as the center stage of the adult student's college experience. Indeed, classrooms are spaces where learners make meaning of their experiences and ideas in multiple ways: through individual reflection on reading and/or lecture, through social interaction with facilitators and other learners, and through various experiential learning opportunities. Therefore, knowing the learning preferences of adult students and how they make meaning of their new learning experiences is important to adult educators. In addition, administrators are concerned with how to attract adults into their institutions. Therefore, knowing the preferences of adult students and how they make meaning of their new learning experiences as a result of their experience in the classroom is important both to adult educators and administrators.

### Statement of the Problem

Adult educators are concerned with how to provide adult students with meaningful learning experiences. Most educators of adults are concerned with

issues such as how to effectively teach these students and motivate them to learn. They are concerned about designing curriculum and learning experiences that will enable adult students to understand and retain knowledge and skills. In addition, administrators are concerned with how to attract adult students to their institutions. Fundamental to addressing these issues would be providing a learning environment that adults perceive as desirable.

Research designed to determine the learning preferences of adult students has been conducted with mixed results. Some of the studies provide evidence of a preference for a predominantly learner-centered environment, which is organized around students' goals and experiences and typically promotes dialogue among participants and in which students are more self directed and help determine their own learning activities (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Dorsey & Pierson, 1984; Shankar, 1994; Welborn, 1986). Other studies conclude that adult students prefer a more teacher-centered environment, which refers to a learning environment where the teacher is in control, organized, knowledgeable, and who predominantly lectures (Bielby, 1980; Check, 1984; Donaldson, 1991; Graham, 1987, 1988; Ommen, Brainard, & Canfield, 1979; Preston, 1976; Slotnick, Pelton, Fuller, & Tabor, 1993; Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986). Still others indicate a preference for a combination of learner-centered and teacher-centered classroom environment (Briggs, 1982; Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, & Bradley, 2000; Flannery, 1991; Loesch & Foley, 1988; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Schmidt, 1983; Sheckley, 1988; Willett & Adams, 1985), which will be referred to as a mixed preference.

Although these studies provide some insight into adult students' learning preferences, the methodology used is predominantly quantitative and does not provide the richness and depth that qualitative research can provide. In addition, existing studies neglect to address the reasons behind students' stated preferences. Further, based on these studies, it is impossible to know whether the students had been exposed to varied learning environments and teaching methodologies or whether their stated preferences were based on a limited experience or a limited menu of options. In addition, only a few of the studies were conducted in a community college environment.

Perhaps an even more important omission from the existing learning preferences literature is the lack of adequate description of the demographic information of the respondents. Since these studies focused on adult students, the age of the students is indicated. However, the research tells us nothing about other demographic characteristics of the participants, such as gender, race, class, and culture; and since higher education classrooms are not comprised of generic adult students, these differences based on students' positionality, or how they are positioned in society and in the classroom based on their gender, race, class, and culture, are important considerations in designing learning experiences to effectively serve all learners. Statistics indicate that 28.00% of the students in degree-granting institutions are students of color, and women comprise 56.00% of that population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In addition, the community college population consists of 58.00% women and nearly 30.00% minorities (American Association of Community Colleges, 1997). Reading Area Community College's population is made up of 67.00%

women and 30.00% minorities (Reading Area Community College, 2004).

Researchers have argued that students' educational experiences differ based on their positionality (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 1998; Sheared & Sissel, 2001). Characteristics such as gender (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982), race (Aiken et al., 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 1998), class (Bingham, 1995; Luttrell, 1989; Maneval, 2000; Shor, 1996), and culture (Alfred, 2003; Sparks, 2003) have been shown to affect the meanings students give to their learning experiences. Currently, within the learning preferences literature, there is a lack of data-based research that uncovers the learning preferences of diverse students.

Finally, the existing learning preferences literature focuses only on what students prefer, such as lecture or small group work. It does not address anything about how they construct new knowledge in light of both individual reflection and the social dimensions of learning, including dialogue and class discussion. It is impossible to uncover these dimensions of learning through quantitative analysis.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom. This qualitative study extends the existing learning preferences literature by providing depth through interviews of participants, designed to learn of their preferences in their own words. It was also intended to uncover the reasons behind their stated

preferences and the meaning of their new learning in light of both individual preferences and the social context of the higher education classroom. In addition, a diverse group of students was selected in order to determine how learning preferences differ based on participants' positionality and to learn the meanings diverse students place on their classroom experiences from among those who have actually experienced a variety of teaching approaches in the higher education classroom.

### Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the characteristics of the learning environment preferred by adult community college students? (b) What are the underlying reasons for adult community college students' stated preferences? (c) What is the perceived relationship of adult community college students between their individual learning and the social context of the classroom? (d) How do adult community college students' differences based on gender, race, class, and culture affect their stated learning preferences? (e) How do diverse community college students make meaning of their new learning?

### Conceptual Framework

Social constructivism provides the primary lens through which to view this study. Constructivism emphasizes "the active participation of the knower in the structuring processes that characterize knowing" (Mahoney, 1996, p. 129). In discussing social constructivism, Gergen (1994) notes that "knowledge is lodged within the sphere of social relatedness" (p. 30). He contends that individuals are free to construct for themselves different realities and that how the learner

categorizes the world is based on tradition that is passed down through social interactions, hence, the term social constructivism. Schwandt (2000) argues that human beings construct knowledge to make sense of experience and they “continually test and modify these constructs in light of new experiences” (p. 197). St. Pierre-Hirtle (1996, p. 91) quotes Shor, who said that “Constructivism is a way of building knowledge about self, school, everyday experience, and society through reflection and meaning making” about individual and social experiences. Social constructivism was chosen as the primary lens for this study because each learner takes away from a class a somewhat different understanding, shaped by his or her personal interpretive framework, prior knowledge, and motivation, and learners will mutually influence the sense each makes of their common experiences (Clark, 1998) because of the interaction and social context of the classroom. It is this meaning that this study sought to understand.

Since this study focuses on the learning preferences of adult students, it is also informed by the concept of andragogy, which is a group of assumptions about teaching adults differently from children (Knowles, 1990). Knowles’ interpretation of andragogy states that adults want to know why they need to learn something, have a need to be self-directed, come to the educational setting with experience, come ready to learn what they need to learn, are task-centered rather than subject-centered, and are more intrinsically motivated than younger learners. The focus on the adult student’s experience embodied in the concept of andragogy is compatible with the social constructivist’s belief that knowledge is both self-constructed and constructed in light of the social context in which it



takes place. Andragogy refers to building on learners' experiences, and it is through these experiences that they have previously constructed meanings. While the focus of andragogy has traditionally been on the individual learner's experience, given its emphasis on learners' participation and discussion of their own life experiences, there is an implicit assumption that much learning takes place in a social context through the influence of social interaction. Such interaction can be encouraged through the set up of a learning environment by a caring facilitator. Thus, this study is strongly informed by andragogy, while highlighting the implicit though unstated assumptions of andragogy and the relevant literature related to the social dimensions of the learning environment and the importance of a caring facilitator. While andragogy has its strengths and talks about the needs of adult students in general, it does not address how issues of gender, race, class, and culture affect learning. Therefore, the literature that deals with these issues also informs this study. This literature broadly conceived is grounded in social constructivism in that the literature also assumes learners construct meaning in light of their gender, racial, class, and cultural background and experience.

While the learning preferences literature mentioned earlier in this chapter is a primary part of the conceptual framework of this study, it is silent concerning the gender, race, class, and culture of the study participants. Thus, the literature addressing the concern for a more inclusive adult learning environment was included in the conceptual framework. Although often referred to by the broad term "multicultural education," various authors have expressed this concern using terms such as cultural relevance, critical multiculturalism, antiracist education,

antioppressive education, and critical and feminist pedagogy. In addition, research literature reporting the impact of gender, race, class, and culture on students' educational experiences was reviewed.

Although it was not initially planned as part of the literature review, the desire for a caring instructor emerged as important to the participants in this study of the learning preferences of adult community college students. Therefore, a review of the literature on caring in the classroom is included since caring is not explicitly discussed in the learning preferences literature nor in the diversity literature.

### Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study because it facilitates study in depth and detail and is unconstrained by predetermined categories (Patton, 2002). A qualitative analysis was particularly useful for this study since qualitative analysis aids in understanding meanings of participants in a study as well as the context and how it influences participants (Bickman & Rog, 1998). In qualitative research, researchers seek to understand the meanings people have constructed about their experiences (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, a qualitative design was chosen for this study that explored the meanings students attach to their educational experiences. The final product of a qualitative analysis is "richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2002, p. 5). The researcher's findings are in the participants' own words permitting "one to understand the world as seen by the respondents" (Patton, 2002, p. 21).

This study was conducted from a social constructivist perspective, which is especially appropriate since it emphasizes the meanings participants place on

their experiences. The social constructivist perspective is consistent with my view that participants construct knowledge within their learning experiences, both individually and socially, as they interact with other learners and facilitators.

The participants selected for this study were a purposeful sample of adult community college students. Adult is defined for the purposes of this study as a person who is 25 years of age or older. The researcher intentionally selected participants to represent a diverse cross-section of the adult community college student population seeking representation across gender, race, class, and culture.

In this qualitative study, the researcher was the primary research instrument (Merriam, 2002). Eighteen in-depth individual interviews were conducted as well as two focus groups with students who volunteered to participate in the study, from among those who had been exposed to a number of teaching methodologies such as lecture, small group activities, discussion, and case study analysis. The data were analyzed according to the constant-comparative method, which involves “systematically examining and refining variations in emergent” concepts (Patton, 2002). My role, as the researcher, was to ask semi-structured, open-ended questions and to listen to participants’ answers with an open mind trying to find the meanings inherent in their words. The social constructivist perspective acknowledges that the researcher and the participants mutually construct meaning. However, every attempt was made to report findings that reflected the participants’ own voices to the extent possible. Findings are reported in a qualitative narrative that includes rich descriptions provided in the students’ own words.

## Significance of the Study

The findings of this qualitative study add to the existing adult education literature on adult students' learning preferences. Knowing about the learning preferences of adult community college students is important because of the increasing number of adult students in college classrooms. In order to meet the educational needs of this particular group of students, adult educators as well as administrators can more effectively design programs and plan classroom activities if they are armed with information about what adult students consider to be important in their college classroom environment. Programs and classroom activities designed to meet the educational needs of adult students can aid in attracting and retaining them as well as helping to ensure their success.

The research literature aimed at understanding the learning preferences of adult college students is not extensive, and what does exist is quantitative. The existing literature leaves the reasons behind adult students' stated preferences unexplained. In addition, that literature is unclear concerning how adult students construct meaning out of their learning experiences and the role of the social context and the classroom environment in building on and helping students make further meaning of those experiences. It has been speculated that students state a particular preference because they have had exposure to only limited methods of teaching. This study adds to the existing literature concerning adult students' learning preferences by adding depth by delving into the reasons for the students' stated preferences. Participants in this study were purposefully selected from among adult students who have had varied educational experiences so that it could be more clearly determined whether they do in fact

prefer a particular style of learning or whether they are not aware of other choices. The qualitative design of this study is better suited to investigating the reasons behind students' stated preferences and to get at the nature of how interaction in the social context of the classroom affects learning than the quantitative studies previously conducted.

The existing literature on adult students' learning preferences treats the adult student as a generic entity. No mention is made of demographic characteristics such as gender, race, class, and culture. This study has furthered the knowledge about adult students' learning preferences by studying a diverse group of students to determine what differences exist based on positionality. The purposeful sample selected for this study included a diverse group of adult community college students and thus adds to the literature on what we know about learning preferences and the experience of a diverse group of students in the community college classroom.

This study is important to me personally since for nearly a quarter of a century I have devoted my career to teaching adult community college students. Hardly a day goes by that I do not plan activities to better serve this group of nontraditional learners. I am engaged in a continual assessment of what adult students want and need in order to best facilitate their success in the community college classroom. The outcomes of this study will be valuable to me and others like me who dedicate our careers to promoting the educational success of adults in the higher education classroom.

## Assumptions

There are a number of assumptions that were made at the beginning of this study. Some of these follow:

1. Individuals construct knowledge in a social context, through individual cognitive processes and the social context and interactions of the classroom.
2. Participants would welcome the opportunity to talk about their learning preferences and be truthful in describing their preferred learning environment and activities.
3. As the researcher, I would be able to establish sufficient rapport and confidence to encourage participants to trust me and share their stories.
4. Participants would be able to recall and clearly share their educational experiences.
5. I would be able to clearly understand the lived experiences of the participants and be able to report participants' stories in a manner that accurately reflects their experiences.
6. Knowing the learning preferences of the adult students selected for this study would be valuable in serving the needs of other adult students.

## Limitations

All research studies have some limitations, and this study was no exception. Some of the limitations of this study include the following:

1. This is a qualitative research study; and in general, qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable since the findings are based on a small purposeful sample. Nevertheless, the study does provide an in-depth

examination of the phenomenon; and teachers and learners in adult higher education classrooms can determine whether or not the study is applicable to their situations.

2. Since the researcher is the main instrument in the collection of data in qualitative research, as the researcher, my beliefs about how knowledge is constructed based on my years of experience teaching in higher education classrooms has informed this study. As an educator in a community college, I have a particular viewpoint that has an effect on how I interpret data. However, all research is a result of the interests of the researcher in both qualitative as well as quantitative research. Therefore, the use of member checks with participants following my data analysis was conducted to assure me of the accuracy of my portrayal of their stories and to increase the dependability of the findings.

3. Participants in this study know that I am a teacher within the college and may have provided answers that they believed that I wanted to hear. I did everything possible to encourage them to be honest and share their own ideas with me.

4. Participants' responses may have been limited by the capacity of their memories. Further, the act of being interviewed may have changed participants' recollections of past events. They may have made new meanings in the telling of their stories. However, this is the fundamental belief of the social constructivist framework: that people further construct knowledge and make new meanings in the context of dialogue and other social contexts.

## Definition of Terms

adult student—For the purposes of this study, adult student is defined as a student who is 25 years of age or older.

diverse—For the purposes of this study, diversity/diverse refers to all ways in which people differ such as gender, race, class, culture, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, ethnic background, religion, learning styles, and introversion/extroversion.

hegemony—The accepted standards and ideas perpetuated by society that allow one social class to exercise political, cultural, or economic dominance over all other members of society.

learner-centered learning environment—A classroom learning environment that is organized around students' goals and experiences and in which students are more self directed and help determine their own learning activities.

mixed learning environment—A classroom learning environment that contains a combination of learner-centered and teacher-centered characteristics.

multicultural education—For the purposes of this paper, multicultural education is used to encompass a broad array of approaches to education designed to meet the needs of a diverse group of students.

nontraditional student—A student who did not enter college directly after high school graduation.

positionality—How people are positioned in society and the classroom based on characteristics such as gender, race, class, and culture.



teacher-centered learning environment—A classroom learning environment where the teacher is in control, organized, knowledgeable, and who predominantly lectures.

traditional student—A student who entered college directly after high school graduation.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom. Of particular interest in this study is the effect of gender, race, class, and culture on the learning experiences of adult community college students.

Four main bodies of literature are relevant to this study. First, the literature review will begin with a discussion of social constructivism, which is the theoretical lens that informs this study. This will be followed by a review of the research literature concerning the learning preferences of adult students because this study aims to find out what types of teaching strategies adult students prefer; thus, studies that have been done in the past on this topic are important to consider. Third, because we are becoming an increasingly diverse society and because adult students in classes are from diverse backgrounds based on gender, race, class, and culture, the next section will consider the literature related to dealing with diversity in classrooms. Finally, this discussion will conclude with a discussion of the literature on the importance of caring in the educational process. This section was added to the literature review after conducting the study because a desire for caring instructors emerged as such an important finding of the study. Thus, the literature about caring needed to be considered in order to make greater sense of the findings of the study.

## Social Constructivism

Constructivism gets its name because it emphasizes the active participation of the learner in structuring knowledge (Mahoney, 1996) rather than learning passively from teachers and textbooks (Stage, Muller, Kinsie, & Simmons, 1998). This section will begin by considering first the different versions of constructivism and then what constructivism suggests for teaching and learning.

### *A Continuum of Constructivisms*

There are many versions of constructivism. As Stage et al. (1998) note, what they all have in common is the belief that knowledge is constructed by learners trying to make sense of their environments. Some authors focus more on the role of meaning making as constructed in the heads of individuals, whereas others focus more on the sociocultural conditions and forces that affect the knowledge construction processes of individuals interacting with others in their worlds (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Stage et al., 1998). Drawing on Philips' work, Merriam and Caffarella speak of a continuum between the individual orientation and the social perspective of constructivism. Those who focus on the individual aspects of constructivism, such as Piaget and those who rely on his work, view the construction of knowledge as though learners are not impacted by their social interactions (Stage et al., 1998). Those at the social end of the continuum argue that individuals are not alone and that the world is always impinging on them. Social constructivists contend that the social aspects must be considered when looking at the construction of knowledge. They believe that cognitive growth takes place primarily through social exchanges such as

discussion and negotiation. Social constructivist thought is grounded in the work of Lev Vygotsky, who contends that individual meaning comes from language and social interaction (Stage et al., 1998).

Gergen (1994) falls on the social end of Philips' continuum when he encourages us to embrace social constructivism and to rethink the idea of individual knowledge, which he refers to as a cultural mainstay of Western life. He portrays knowledge as an integral part of social relatedness. Gergen explains that the constructive part of social constructivism refers to the idea that "equally rational, competent, and informed observers" (p. 41) are free to construct for themselves different realities. The social part of social constructivism is that "categories are vicariously received, not individually invented" (p. 41). In other words, although an individual's reality is unique, that reality is influenced by factors in the social world surrounding the individual.

The term social construction actually originated with Dewey when he asserted that the "psychological and social sides of education are organically related and that education cannot be regarded as a compromise between the two, or a superimposition of one upon the other" (as cited in St. Pierre-Hirtle, 1996, p. 91). Shor (as cited in St. Pierre-Hirtle, 1996) refers to constructivism as a way of building knowledge through reflection and meaning making. Social constructivism recognizes that knowledge is never neutral because it comes from one's social interactions and the ways that knowledge is created are as important as the knowledge itself.

A primary goal of constructivism is to provide students with a democratic and critical learning experience so that they will not unquestioningly accept

prevailing knowledge (St. Pierre-Hirtle, 1996). Social constructivism takes into account that theorists, authors, and learners construct knowledge based partly on where they are located relative to the dominant culture; it takes into account that gender, race, class, and culture are factors that obviously affect people's experiences in the world and thus how they would construct knowledge in light of that experience. Mahoney (1996) speaks to this point in his discussion of the constructivist roots of Belenky et al.'s 1986 study of how women come to know and learn. In connecting social constructivism with feminism, he notes:

More resonant with feminist and Eastern viewpoints, the constructivist self is a dynamic, diversified, and thoroughly connected complex of processes.

Not only is the self embedded in social systems, but social systems pervade the self. Developments in one necessarily influence the other."

(Mahoney, 1996, p. 130)

Thus, a social constructivist view of the world is more consonant with some of the questions that this study seeks to answer.

### *Social Constructivism and Teaching and Learning*

Social constructivists view the learning process as students constructing their own new meanings about natural phenomena in a sociocultural context rather than students simply acquiring the meanings that others give to natural phenomena (Atwater, 1996). Gergen (1994) argues that all we know to be the truth came about not because it is the truth but because of processes of social interchange.

In speaking primarily about teaching and learning in formal situations such as classrooms, Clark (1998) believes that learners come to the learning situation

with knowledge, skills, expectations, memories, and misconceptions and that learning involves making sense of our experiences and integrating them into our mental model of the world. Learning is both individual and social in the context of a course. Individual learners will use their personal sense-making framework to interpret what they read, write, see, hear, and feel; and each learner will take away a somewhat different understanding of a reading, discussion, or lecture, shaped by his or her personal interpretive framework, prior knowledge, and motivation. At the same time, when learners in a course are given the opportunity, they will mutually influence the sense each makes of their common experiences through dialogue, engagement of ideas, and asking questions of each other and of the instructor (Clark, 1998). Social constructivism does not negate the individual aspects of learning but recognizes that the social construction of knowledge is a major aspect of learning that cannot be ignored.

Constructivists challenge the idea that there is a fixed body of knowledge that can be transmitted to or deposited into learners in a way that Freire (1996) refers to as the banking method of education. Hurd and Brabeck (1997) cite Bohan, who contends that constructivist teaching discourages the search for one truth and encourages the examination of how social and political positions affect the way knowledge has been constructed in what are socially held truths.

Atwater (1996), a science educator, provides an example of the concerns of social constructivist educators when they look at science education research through a constructivist lens. While she is speaking about science education in particular, her work can be applied by social constructivist teachers in many disciplines. Atwater contends that gender issues have been a matter of concern

in science education, but little attention has been focused on class, culture, disability, ethnicity, language, and power in the learning and teaching of science. She argues that the scientific disciplines are socially constructed and contends that for meaningful conversations to take place in the classroom students need to be encouraged to overcome conventions that shape day-to-day conversation, especially by members of the dominant culture, such as how to deal with conflict (Atwater, 1996). Through a social constructivist lens, scientific knowledge can be evaluated in a sociocultural context; and the scientist's position of preeminence can be challenged. Atwater argues that the status quo of research in science education should be challenged. Teachers should "provide ways to reflect critically on this educational inquiry and transform the research agenda so that many different kinds of problems are investigated and many voices are heard" (p. 830). This example of science education provides just one instance of how one's positionality based on characteristics such as gender, race, class, and culture act to affect students' learning as well as what is studied.

Many educators coming from a social constructivist perspective attend to issues of positionality such as gender, race, class, and age. Particularly relevant to this study is Kasworm's (2005) recent study grounded in a social constructivist perspective of how adult students construct their identity based on age in the intergenerational community college classroom. Three frames of positional identity meaning making affected them—beliefs of age-appropriate societal norms for involvement in college, beliefs of academic competence based in age-related notions of academic performance, and beliefs of the ideal college student. These adult students also constructed their meanings of a student identity

through relationships. This relational identity was related to adults' positional identities and their interactions with faculty, fellow students, and their place within the classroom. Kasworm points out that "there is not a monolithic adult student identity" (p. 16). Although these adult participants view their beliefs of student identity as interrelated, they do not necessarily view them as related to their age and maturity. These adult students reported that their constructed identities stem from a combination of common and diverse experiences, beliefs, and actions. The participants in this study reported mostly "positive relational identities with faculty, positive connections between the adults' sense of themselves as adult learners and the younger students, and a belief of a more authoritative, intergenerational dynamic for their classroom actions in the community college classroom" (p. 17). A key finding of this study was that adult students constructed an image of the ideal college student and then judged themselves and others based on it. The constructed identities of these students delineated their beliefs about who should be college students, how college students should engage in classroom learning, and what matters in the college experience" (p. 18).

Atwater (1996) comments that science students do not need their teachers to come from a position of power, rather they need them to serve as coordinators, facilitators, and resources. Questions should be studied such as: Who decides what science is to be learned? How can meaningful science learning occur in classrooms where the teacher is a member of a cultural group that is different from the students or where the science classroom is multicultural? Just as Atwater raises these questions relative to science education, these are the questions that social constructivists would raise to



attend to the differing positionality of learners based on gender, race, class, and culture relative to their own teaching discipline. They recognize that learners are diverse and differences cannot be ignored and that one teaching strategy is not adequate.

What activities would be appropriate to further the social constructivist's agenda? Constructivists emphasize the importance of language and communication in the social construction of knowledge (Gergen, 1994; St. Pierre-Hirtle, 1996) arguing that learning takes place through communication and dialogue that honors learners' cultures, knowledge, and experiences. Since social constructivism is a meaning making process in which learners engage socially in dialogue about shared problems or tasks (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), Clark (1998) encourages conversation in which learners negotiate knowledge with one another. Therefore, he encourages educators to use a variety of methods that promote communication that can socially influence learners as well as enhance understanding and remembering. Atwater (1996) encourages participatory activities in which diverse learners can work together so that meaningful communication can take place. Discussion and group activities are examples of teaching strategies that can promote this type of meaningful communication among diverse students.

Although social constructivist approaches have been discussed primarily in K-12 education, evidence indicates some activity at the college level. Interaction between student and teacher and among students is being reconceived (Stage et al., 1998). The social constructivist model portrays teaching and learning as social exchanges between teachers and students and

among students. The constructivist's view of the teacher is that of a facilitator who helps students discover meaning, and interaction among students is viewed as a primary method of learning. In addition, collaborative learning and problem-based learning are evidenced in some areas of higher education. The national call to change how and what is taught in colleges is accountable for a movement toward social constructivist practices such as discussion of material rather than lecture, application of material to real problems, collaboration with other learners, students actively constructing their own meanings, and consideration of the diverse views of others.

Social constructivism is the best theoretical framework for this study that explored the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom because social constructivism is rooted in the idea that knowledge is constructed by individuals interacting with others through discussion and collaborative activities. Grounding this study in social constructivism has provided a focus on students' learning based on their individual differences as well as their social interactions in the classroom. An important part of this study was to learn students' views on classroom activities and how their learning was impacted by other students' ideas and their interactions with them.

### Learning Preferences

This section will review and critique the literature concerning the learning preferences of adult students. First, the increasing number of adult students in institutions of higher education will be addressed along with a discussion of

andragogy, which has been an important concept concerning the teaching of adults. The relevance of learning preferences will be introduced followed by a review of the adult learning preferences literature. Then, the learning preferences literature will be reviewed and critiqued in relation to andragogy to determine whether and to what extent the preferences indicated by adult students in this research are grounded in that concept.

### *Adult Students in Higher Education*

Institutions of higher education have historically served a population of traditional students who, at approximately age 18, graduate from high school and immediately enter college. However, the student population on college campuses has been evolving to include larger numbers of nontraditional students. For the purposes of this study, the terms nontraditional student and adult student will be used interchangeably to refer to students who are 25 years of age or older. Although definitions in the field of adult education usually include more criteria than age (Merriam & Brockett, 1997), the wide variety of studies included in this review defined adult as either 23 or 25 years of age or older. The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reports that in 1999, 39.12% of students in degree-granting institutions was comprised of students 25 years of age or older. They also predict that in the year 2010, 38.00% of college students will be 25 years of age or older and 17.00% will be 35 years of age or older. Bendixen-Noe (1998) reports that the number of nontraditional students in undergraduate programs has reached 45.00%. The American Association of Community Colleges reports that in 1997 47.00% of community college students were 25 years of age or older. Reading Area Community College (2004) reports an adult

student population of 46.87%. Because of this increasing number of adults returning to college classrooms in graduate and undergraduate programs, many educators involved in higher education are eager to determine what kind of classroom learning environment these adult learners prefer. Knowing their learning preferences is important to maximizing their educational success. Educators are concerned with how to create a classroom learning environment that will assist adult students to learn. This concern is often expressed in terms of motivation of students, retention of students, and students' retention of material. How do we excite students and create a desire to learn? What mode of delivery can we use to help students understand and retain knowledge and skills? Fundamental to addressing these issues would be providing a classroom learning environment that adults perceive as desirable. Some researchers contend that nontraditional students need to be taught differently. Bendixen-Noe argues that educators in higher education need to modify conditions to better serve nontraditional students.

In the field of adult education, this idea of teaching adult students differently from traditional students is embodied in the concept of andragogy, which is defined as "a set of assumptions concerning adult learning processes from which we can derive a number of injunctions concerning appropriate teaching methods" (Brookfield, 1987, p. 120). Knowles (1990), who originally brought the concept of andragogy into adult education in the early 1980s, notes that andragogy is based on the following primary assumptions: that adults want to know why they need to learn something, have a need to be self-directed, come to the educational setting with experience, come ready to learn what they need to

learn, are task-centered rather than subject-centered, and are more intrinsically motivated than younger learners. Knowles recommends "a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers" (1980, p. 87). Other authors (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Brookfield, 1987) state that andragogy involves the belief that adults are more likely to be self-directed, motivated, responsible, and goal oriented than pre-adults. Brookfield adds that adults have diverse learning styles; they like learning outcomes to have some immediacy of application; they like to participate in the learning process; and they like a comfortable, supportive environment for successful learning.

Since researchers refer to the classroom as the center stage of the adult student's college experience (Donaldson & Graham, 1999) and others suggest that the classroom experience is the focal point of the adult student's learning experience (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley, 1998; Donaldson, 1991; Kasworm, 1995; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994), it is important to learn whether adult learners actually do prefer an andragogical learning environment as described by Knowles (1990). Knowing the learning preferences of adult students is an important component in determining what classroom learning environment would best meet their needs. While there has been much emphasis on andragogy as getting at the learning needs and preferences of adult learners, it is important to note that Knowles discussed the concept of andragogy based on his own principles and beliefs rather than research. Therefore, research-based literature concerning adult students' learning preferences will be addressed next. The purpose of the review in this section is to synthesize the empirical literature relating to the learning preferences of nontraditional students in higher education

published during the past 30 years. In an effort to determine what mode of instruction best meets the needs of adult students, research has been conducted to determine whether adult students prefer a learner-centered or a teacher-centered mode of education. Some of the findings indicate that adult students prefer a more structured, teacher-centered classroom; others have determined that the subjects of their studies prefer the more learner-centered environment, termed andragogy by early adult educators. Still others report a mixed preference from their students, a classroom that is a combination of learner centered and teacher centered.

### *Review of the Research on Learning Preferences*

This review of the literature summarizes the empirical studies relating to the learning preferences of nontraditional students in higher education. The review is organized according to method of selection of studies, settings and respondents, purposes, methodology, and findings.

*Method of Selection.* The literature reviewed in this section includes 23 empirical studies of subjects who were 23 years of age or older at the time of the studies and who were students or prospective students in institutions of higher education with the exception of one study that included a combination of university students as well as corporate and police academy trainees and two studies in which the respondents were teachers or counselors of adult students. In addition, the studies reviewed are concerned with adult students involved in higher education, either at the graduate or undergraduate level. Most of the studies were discovered by searching Dissertation Abstracts International, Educational Resources Index Clearinghouse, and ProQuest Education Complete

using various combinations of the following terms: adult, student, preferences, nontraditional, teaching, and higher education. The search yielded only 23 studies.

*Settings and Respondents.* Since the criteria stated for the selection of studies indicates that this review concerns the learning preferences of adult students involved in higher education, all the studies selected were conducted in either the university or community college setting. Respondents consisted of undergraduate and graduate students or their teachers and counselors as well as some corporate and police academy trainees.

Of the 23 studies included in this review, 17 were conducted in American university settings (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Bielby, 1980; Check, 1984; Donaldson, 1991; Donaldson et al., 1993; Donaldson et al., 2000; Dorsey & Pierson, 1984; Flannery, 1991; Loesch & Foley, 1988; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Schmidt, 1983; Shankar, 1994; Slotnick et al., 1993; Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986; Welborn, 1986; Willett & Adams, 1985). One study was conducted at an Australian university (Briggs, 1982). Four of the studies were conducted in the community college setting (Graham, 1987, 1988; Ommen et al., 1979; Preston, 1976) while one study was a combination of university, corporate training, and police academy training (Sheckley, 1988).

The respondents in 11 of the studies were undergraduate students (Donaldson, et al., 2000; Dorsey & Pierson, 1984; Graham, 1987, 1988; Loesch & Foley, 1988; Ommen et al., 1979; Preston, 1976; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Shankar, 1994; Willett & Adams, 1985), and four studies involved graduate students (Briggs, 1982; Donaldson, 1991; Flannery, 1991;

Schmidt, 1983). Respondents in five additional studies included both undergraduate and graduate students (Check, 1984; Donaldson, et al., 1993; Slotnick et al., 1993; Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986; Welborn, 1986). One of the studies involved adults who were described as a combination of university students, corporate trainees, and police academy students (Sheckley, 1988). Bielby (1980) simply described respondents as adults who were enrolled in or interested in enrolling in higher education. One study (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982) involved teachers and counselors of nontraditional students.

In summary, the settings of the studies cited were predominantly universities with a modest representation of community colleges. The respondents were a combination of undergraduate and graduate students as well as some who were interested in enrolling and some who were trainees. Because of the importance of knowing what students prefer, additional research would be beneficial in all higher education settings; but clearly the community college student has been underrepresented in this area of research. Both undergraduate and graduate students should be studied further in order to obtain a more recent look into adult students' preferences.

Omitted from the existing learning preferences literature is adequate demographic description of the respondents. Since these studies focused on adult students, the age of the students is indicated. However, the research tells us nothing about other demographic characteristics of the participants, such as gender, race, class, and culture; and since higher education classrooms are not comprised of generic adult students, these differences based on students' positionality, or how they are positioned in society and in the classroom based on



their gender, race, class, and culture, are important considerations in designing learning experiences to effectively serve all learners. Statistics indicate that 28.00% of the students in degree-granting institutions are students of color, and women comprise 56.00% of that population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In addition, the community college population consists of 58.00% women and nearly 30.00% minorities. Researchers have argued that students' educational experiences differ based on their positionality (Aiken et al., 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998; Sheared & Sissel, 2001). Characteristics such as gender (Belenky, et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982), race (Aiken et al., 2001; Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998), class (Bingham, 1995; Luttrell, 1989; Maneval, 2000; Shor, 1996), and culture (Alfred, 2003; Sparks, 2003) have been shown to affect the meanings students give to their learning experiences. Currently, within the learning preferences literature, there is a lack of data-based research that uncovers the learning preferences of diverse students.

*Purposes.* Although this review attempts to look into the literature concerning adult students' learning preferences, not all of the studies were conducted for this express purpose. However, all the selected studies were able to provide some insight into the classroom learning environment preferred by nontraditional students. Seven of the studies state that their purpose is to determine the instructional expectations or preferences of adult students (Bielby, 1980; Briggs, 1982; Check, 1984; Flannery, 1991; Schmidt, 1983; Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986; Willett & Adams, 1985). Seven additional studies have as their purpose to compare the preferences of adult nontraditional students with

traditional age students (Donaldson, 1991; Donaldson et al., 1993; Loesch & Foley, 1988; Ommen et. al., 1979; Preston, 1976; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Slotnick et al., 1993). Raven & Jimmerson (1992) as well as Dorsey and Pierson (1984) conducted studies to determine how to help faculty deal with adult students. Shankar (1994) proposed to examine the communication and learning problems of nontraditional students in order to benefit faculty, administrators, and the students. Graham (1987, 1988) attempted to assess the special needs of adults. Sheckley (1988) was searching for students' ideas of their best and worst instructors while Donaldson et al. (2000) asked students what contributed to their success in college. Similarly, Welborn (1986) investigated the relationship of learning style and teaching style to student achievement among returning health professional students. Beder and Darkenwald (1982) were interested in determining if teachers teach adult students differently.

The majority of these studies were intended to determine the preferences of adult students or to compare their preferences with those of traditional-age students. Because of the importance of adult students to institutions of higher education, further research should be conducted in both the university and the community college settings for the express purpose of providing more insight into what today's diverse students are expecting in their classroom learning environment. Furthermore, since today's college students are increasingly diverse, the purpose of the studies should be to find out how difference based on gender, race, class, and culture affect students' stated learning preferences.

*Methodology.* This section summarizes the various methodology used in the studies. Five studies used a questionnaire (Briggs, 1982; Check, 1984;

Preston, 1976; Raven & Jimmerson, 1992; Sheckley, 1988) while four other studies used the questionnaire followed by an interview (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Flannery, 1991; Schmidt, 1983; Slotnick et al., 1993). Three studies used content analysis, two of open-ended questionnaires (Ross-Gordon, 1991; Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986) and one of student letters (Donaldson, 1991). One utilized the face-to-face interview format (Donaldson et al., 2000) while another used telephone interviews (Bielby, 1980). The Learning Preference Inventory (Rezler & French, 1975) was used in one study (Loesch & Foley, 1988), and Canfield's Learning Styles Inventory (1974, 1977, 1983) was used in three of the studies (Ommen et al., 1979; Welborn, 1986; Willett & Adams, 1985). Dorsey and Pierson (1984) used Kolb's (1976a, 1976b) Learning Styles Inventory. In addition, Welborn (1986) included the Principles of Adult Learning Scale (Conti, 1985). Graham (1987, 1988) used information from the American College Testing Program "Adult Learner Needs Assessment Survey." Donaldson et al. (1993) triangulated the results of their previous studies (Donaldson, 1991; Flannery, 1991; Ross-Gordon, 1991) by performing a content analysis. Shankar (1994) used a combination of individual case study and in-depth interviews.

Although a well-designed questionnaire can yield useful information, future research could delve more deeply into adult students' preferences as well as the rationale for their preferences. Qualitative interviews could paint a richer picture of just what adult students are seeking in the learning environment as well as uncover the meanings that people attach to their experiences. Qualitative research would enable educators to gain a better understanding of the needs of our diverse adult student population in order to improve practice.

*Findings.* Analysis of the 23 studies was conducted to determine if adult students prefer a learner-centered or a teacher-centered learning environment. Some of the research hinted at a learner-centered preference while some clearly stated a teacher-centered preference, and yet another group of studies indicated a mixed preference. Therefore, the findings of the 23 studies have been grouped into three major categories according to the apparent instructional preferences of the adult subjects in the studies: learner-centered preference, teacher-centered preference, and mixed preference. Learner centered refers to a classroom learning environment that is organized around students' goals and experiences and in which students are more self directed and help determine their own learning activities. Teacher centered refers to a classroom learning environment where the teacher is in control, organized, knowledgeable, and who predominantly lectures. Mixed preference refers to a classroom learning environment that includes a combination of learner-centered and teacher-centered environmental factors.

Only four studies provided evidence of a preference for a predominantly learner-centered classroom learning environment. A study of nontraditional undergraduate and graduate health professionals who were returning to the university for higher degrees found that achievement was greatest among students whose instructors practiced a collaborative style of instruction similar to that suggested in the adult education literature (Welborn, 1986). Shankar (1994), in an effort to uncover learning problems experienced by nontraditional students

in higher education, found that adult students want their classroom learning to connect to their life experiences and seek more and better communication with faculty.

Support for learner-centered preferences was also found in two studies that were designed for purposes other than determining adult student learning preferences. In an interesting study conducted to learn whether teachers teach adults differently from pre-adults, Beder and Darkenwald (1982) found some support for andragogical assumptions. The teachers studied taught both pre-adult and adult students and perceived adult students to be more motivated and self-directed than the pre-adult students. Dorsey and Pierson (1984) studied the impact of using Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI) by counselors and faculty in effectively working with adult students. One outcome of the study was a student profile that identified dominant adult learning styles that could be useful in designing adult education programs indicating that at about age 33 adults adopt an accommodator learning style where they learn through experience. They concluded that these adult students would benefit from experiential learning rather than a teacher-centered lecture environment. In addition, adult students have a need to learn what is beneficial in order to improve their lives or careers. They come to class armed with life and work experience; teachers of such students would be wise to use teaching styles that take advantage of the knowledge and experience brought to the classroom. These four studies each shed some light on adults as learners and indicate support for learner-centered

teaching assumptions indicating that adults are more motivated and self directed and benefit from a learning environment that is more collaborative and relates learning to real-life experiences.

Nine of the articles reviewed concluded that adult students prefer a more teacher-centered classroom learning environment characterized by a teacher who is in control, organized, knowledgeable, and who predominantly lectures to the class. Four of these studies were designed for the express purpose of learning the instructional preferences of adult students. Adult students at Cleveland State University felt that the "instructor knows best"; the "instructor should be authoritative"; and "students need structure" (Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986, p. 145). Three of the studies investigating learning preferences of adults studied community college students. Preston (1976), in a study of adult community college students, determined that they had a strong preference for traditional learning environments, preferring structured assignments and regular attendance in class rather than independent work. Although a slight majority indicated a preference for discussions and an unstructured classroom, female students over the age of thirty strongly preferred traditional lectures as did respondents in Graham's (1987, 1988) studies of community college students, who expressed a preference for lecture and small group discussion.

The purpose of three other studies was to compare and contrast adult students' preferences with those of traditional age students. Slotnick et al. (1993) found no difference between adult and traditional students with regard to preferences for instructional strategies. Although a diversity of learning preferences was found among learners in any age group, generally respondents

indicated a preference for instructors who were organized, prepared, and knowledgeable, and who had good communication skills, cared about students, were enthusiastic, and challenged students—clearly characteristics of a teacher-centered classroom. Ommen et al. (1979) also compared traditional students with adult students finding that major differences do exist in instructional preferences between these younger and older students. However, the findings are contrary to the concept of andragogy since the older students expressed a desire for a classroom characterized by definite structure and preferred instructors to fill the role of authority figure. These older students indicated a preference for learning by listening and reading indicating yet another teacher-centered group of adult students. Donaldson (1991) studied adult graduate students at a large Midwestern university to determine how these students describe instructors they consider exemplary and to compare these findings with results of studies involving younger students in higher education (Feldman, 1976, 1988; Goldsmid, Gruber, & Wilson, 1977). Donaldson's respondents indicated preferences consistent with the preferences of the younger students in Feldman's and Goldsmid's studies, which were predominantly teacher centered.

Two studies were designed to determine adult student preferences for the purpose of planning and developing programs suitable for adult students. Check (1984) surveyed undergraduate and graduate students for this purpose at the University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh and found an overwhelming preference (over 90%) for the lecture/discussion instructional mode. Almost 80% preferred that a syllabus outline the units to be covered, 70% insisted upon a strict schedule, over 60% wanted an outline of the lectures, and more than 50% preferred that the

instructor determine what material to cover. These characteristics of a teacher-centered instructional environment are similar to the preferences expressed by students at the University of Southern California (Bielby, 1980), who indicated that the lecture method of instruction was the most efficient use of their time and provided the clearest presentation.

Although proponents of andragogy would argue that nontraditional students prefer a classroom learning environment characterized by a focus on learners and their experiences and goals, the outcomes of these studies suggest that a classroom structured and controlled by the instructor is desired by many nontraditional students. They view the instructor as the knowledge expert who should structure the goals and activities of the classroom as well as deliver knowledge to the students through a predominantly lecture format.

Approximately half of the studies reviewed determined that adult students prefer a learning environment characterized by a combination of learner-centered and teacher-centered teaching strategies, which will be labeled a mixed preference. Four of the mixed preference studies were conducted to learn the instructional preferences of adult students. Sheckley (1988) surveyed adult students concerning their best and worst learning experiences to uncover what they perceived as a desirable learning situation. Respondents indicated a preference for teachers who increased appreciation for subject matter, were sensitive to the response of the class, and had a command of the subject matter. Teachers were preferred who made the class exciting, summarized major points, and presented material in an organized manner. In addition, students liked teachers who related class topics to students' lives and experiences, welcomed



class discussion, and encouraged independent action. These results are clearly a mixture of a teacher-centered and learner-centered classroom environment. Schmidt (1983) studied graduate students for the main purpose of determining learning preferences of returning adult students and found that these adult students wanted teachers to be well-organized, proficient content experts. In addition, they wanted to be allowed to establish their own learning goals and meet and work with their classmates; again, a mixed learning preference is indicated. Flannery (1991) reported similar findings in a study of graduate students in a large Midwestern university, who reported a high preference for clearly organized coursework along with concern for students. Briggs (1982) surveyed Australian graduate students to determine their learning preferences and identified the following teaching/learning preferences of adult students: seminars in which students present papers and discuss them, practical projects, case studies, lectures, workshops, individual projects, and seminars in which students' own relevant work experiences are discussed. These preferences represent a strong leaning toward the more learner-centered andragogical classroom, but there were elements of teacher centeredness as well. A surprising outcome was Briggs' analysis of the findings by age, which found that younger respondents viewed students' participation in course design somewhat more favorably than did the adults.

Three of the studies set out to explore adult students' conceptions of good teaching with the express purpose of comparing adults students' preferences with the preferences of traditional students. Ross-Gordon (1991) discovered undergraduate adult students who indicated a preference for an interesting,

clear, organized teaching style as well as a concern for students, a warm learning climate, and teacher assistance outside of class. Donaldson et al. (1993) triangulated the results of their previous individual studies (Donaldson, 1991; Flannery, 1991, & Ross-Gordon, 1991) for the purpose of comparing the findings with the current literature on traditional students. They determined that adult students prefer some aspects of a teacher-centered as well as aspects of a learner-centered classroom environment. They want the teacher to be knowledgeable, present material clearly, motivate students, and be enthusiastic. However, respondents in this study also indicated student-centered characteristics such as an instructor who shows concern for student learning, emphasizes the relevance of material, encourages student participation, and is open to questions. Willett and Adams (1985) studied a group of nontraditional external degree students comparing their learning style preferences with that of traditional students by administering the Canfield Learning Style Inventory (Canfield, 1977, 1983; Canfield & Lafferty, 1974). Significant differences were discovered between this study group and the traditional students in the Canfield norm group. The adult students preferred to set their own instructional goals, which were usually job specific; and they desired a mutual understanding between themselves and the instructor. However, they also indicated a need for detail concerning assignments, requirements, and rules. Willett and Adams summarize the findings as a preference for a traditionally structured environment; this seems inconsistent with the preferences indicated above, which appear to be a combination of both teacher and learner centered.

Donaldson et al. (2000) studied adult undergraduate students for the purpose of determining the factors they believe contribute to their college success. The classroom experience was among the top six factors identified. Respondents spoke of the classroom as a place for connecting with others as well as discussing content and its relationship to their experiences. Additionally, they commended professors who were passionate about their subjects, motivated students, rewarded students, and had high expectations of students. They looked to professors for structure, examples, explanations, and discussion in addition to projects that actively involved students. These students' ideal classroom would be a mixture of teacher- and learner-centered aspects.

A survey of both faculty and students was conducted to determine how faculty might better serve the adult undergraduate students (Raven & Jimmerson, 1992). Both traditional and nontraditional students rated highest the desire for a clear presentation and a logical sequence and stressed the importance of a syllabus and outline. The respondents were also interested in a one-on-one relationship between students and teachers and expressed a need to share their experiences and get more involved in self-directed learning opportunities.

Loesch and Foley (1988) compared the learning preferences of two groups of adult students—undergraduates in a nontraditional more learner-centered program and undergraduates enrolled in a more teacher-centered traditional program. The adult students who enrolled in the nontraditional program indicated a preference for self-directed learning situations while the adults who enrolled in the teacher-centered traditional program preferred

situations that were structured by the teacher. It is interesting to note that when given a choice adult students appear to have chosen the learning environment that better suits their learning preferences.

The studies expressing a mixed preference indicate that perhaps it is not necessary to make a choice between learner-centered or teacher-centered teaching strategies but that elements of each may comprise the ideal adult classroom as was indicated by Knowles' (1990) more recent viewpoint. Findings from these studies suggest that adult students prefer a classroom that is structured and controlled by the instructor, who is a content expert but who also attends to the needs and experiences of adult students.

### *Discussion and Gaps*

The stated purpose of this review of the adult learning preferences literature is to examine the empirical literature published during the past 30 years relating to the learning preferences of nontraditional students in higher education. According to the concept of andragogy, a mainstay on the menu of adult educators for many years, it might be concluded that adult students prefer a learner-centered classroom environment that allows students a great deal of autonomy in determining their learning goals and methods and that students and their experiences should be the focal point of classroom activities (Beder & Darkenwald, 1982; Brookfield, 1987). After reviewing these 23 empirical studies concerning nontraditional students' learning preferences, one might doubt the existence of these self-directed adult students since the majority of these studies suggest that adult students are seeking a highly structured, teacher-centered

classroom or an environment made up of both learner-centered and teacher-centered characteristics. At this point, one can only speculate about the reasons for these adult students' preferences.

Perhaps adult students come to the classroom with expectations based on their previous experiences in school where the teacher was the ruler of the classroom, telling them what they should learn and how they should learn it (Donaldson, 1991; Flannery, 1991; Ross-Gordon, 1991). In addition, it may be that students are more confident when they believe that the instructor is a content expert (Schmidt, 1983). They may feel more comfortable with a structure in which the instructor has control of the classroom and they are clearly informed about what they need to do to achieve success. Adults may also have a perception that a teacher-centered classroom is a more efficient use of their time and energy (Bielby, 1980), both of which are scarce commodities in their lives. Students' differing learning styles may account for differences in preferences (Flannery, 1991; Loesch & Foley, 1988; Sheckley, 1988), or students' degree of familiarity with the course content may be the reason for their preferences. They may prefer a more teacher-centered classroom learning environment when they know little about the subject.

It appears that factors traditional students consider important to effective instruction—enthusiasm; stimulating interest in subject matter; a clear, well-prepared, well-organized course—are also important to adults (Sheckley, 1988). At the same time, these adult students do arrive in the classroom with a richness of life experiences that they did not possess as younger students. They may be eager to include those experiences in their learning. As they mature, adult

students may have acquired a measure of self-directedness they did not possess at an earlier age. Although they want instructors to be in charge, they also want them to respond to students' needs. Adults often indicate a need for instructors to encourage independent action. Instructors may be well advised to supplement traditional excellent teaching with activities that promote student interactions and link to students' experiences.

The purpose of this study was to delve more deeply into what adult community college students prefer in their classroom learning environment and the reasons behind their stated preferences. Because of the large number of adult students in higher education today, faculty and administrators should be concerned about the scarcity of research concerning nontraditional students' classroom learning preferences. The majority of the studies in this review were conducted 10 to 30 years ago; it would be beneficial to update the information concerning adult students' classroom learning preferences with studies involving contemporary students.

Although quantitative data is informative, qualitative interviews should be conducted to add depth to the body of knowledge concerning adult students' learning preferences. Future research could delve more deeply into adult students' preferences as well as the rationale for their preferences. Qualitative interviews could paint a richer picture of just what adult students are seeking in the learning environment. Qualitative research is better able to uncover the meanings that people attach to their experiences and would enable educators to better understand people's needs in order to improve practice.

Exploration of the reasons behind adult students' stated classroom learning preferences could also be enlightening. Some researchers have speculated that past educational experiences in traditional educational institutions influence current learning preferences. Research designed to explore students' rationales for their choices would provide some interesting insight into the learning preferences debate. Researchers could delve into the past experiences of adult students to determine how these experiences relate to their classroom learning preferences (Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986).

The existing learning preferences literature tells us nothing about the respondents except that they are adults and they are involved in graduate or undergraduate educational programs. It is silent concerning other characteristics of the respondents such as gender, race, class, and culture. Further research is needed to look into adult students' classroom learning preferences taking into consideration learner differences based on these characteristics that are part of students' identities. Since higher education classrooms are not comprised of generic adult students, these differences based on students' positionality, or how they are positioned in society and the classroom based on characteristics such as gender, race, class, and culture, are important considerations in designing learning experiences to effectively serve all learners. Since satisfying learner preferences as well as assuring adult student success is important to the success of both students and educational programs and institutions, research should continue to explore these areas to better meet the needs of a diverse

group of adult students and assure their continued success. The next section of this chapter focuses on how issues of positionality such as gender, race, class, and culture impact adult students' learning.

### The Impact of Gender, Race, Class, and Culture on Learning

As the population of the United States continues to increase in diversity, it becomes even more important that education be designed to serve all members of that diverse population. "Diverse," as used here, refers to all ways in which people differ such as gender, race, class, culture, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, ethnic background, religion, learning styles, and even introversion/extroversion. The areas of diversity addressed by this literature review, however, will be limited to gender, race, class, and culture and will look at how these factors affect teaching and learning.

The following statistics show the diverse make up of the population of the United States and provide some support for arguing for education that takes into consideration the gender, race, class, and culture of learners. In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the U.S. population was 11.90% Black or African American; 13.85% Hispanic; 4.10% Asian; .13% Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders; .66% American Indian and Alaskan Native; 1.57%; Other; and 67.78% non-Hispanic White. Banks (1999) states that more than one-third of the nation's public school students are students of color. By the end of the second decade of the new century, that population is projected to comprise nearly one-half of all students. In addition, the gap between the affluent and the poor continues to widen (Banks & Banks, 1997). These school students will move into our institutions of higher education and other areas of adult education. In order to



respond effectively to both the challenges and opportunities related to the increasing diversity within the United States, teachers and administrators at all levels, including adult and higher education, need to have a firm grasp of how to educate a multicultural population (Banks, 1999).

In recent years, many educators and researchers at both the K-12 level and in higher education report inequalities in the ways students are treated in the educational system based on gender, race, class, and culture. Although diverse people are being represented more in teaching materials today than in the past, there is less diversity in what teachers actually teach. For example, when people of color or women are included, it is in a supplementary way; and people living below the middle class are virtually excluded from course content (Sleeter & Grant, 1999).

Teachers in most American colleges reflect the values and assumptions of Western culture, which are then incorporated into the goals, expectations, and curricula. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 1999 only approximately 14% of the faculty in U.S. colleges and universities were minorities. Students who are not part of the dominant group often experience academic difficulty when their cultural assumptions are different from those of the college (Sawchuk, 1992). For example, according to Sleeter and Grant (1999), some Asian-American students do not ask questions in class because they may interpret the act of questioning as a challenge to the teacher while most faculty in American schools view student questions as a sign of interest and involvement and will even lower a student's grade for failure to participate. They also note that African-American students sometimes suffer academically in schools because

their learning style tends to be oriented toward cooperation, content about people, discussion and hands-on work, and whole-to-part learning, which conflicts with the independent, task-oriented, reading-oriented, part-to-whole style that most teachers employ with most students. Following the work of Deyhle on Native American students, Sleeter & Grant (1999) note that white students learn early to display their knowledge publicly for evaluation while Navajo students, who learn that serious learning is private, do not exert their best effort in this context when tested.

The field of adult education has not been immune to this focus on the dominant culture. The hegemony implicit in the field of adult education was publicly exposed when in 1991 the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE), a part of the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), published *Adult Education: Evolution and Achievement in a Developing Field of Study*, the goal of which was to reflect on accomplishments in the field of adult education as well as to characterize the field and consider its future. Although some adult educators were attending to issues of diversity in their research, this volume did not include such work. In May 1992, at the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), the book and the CPAE were rejected and accused of being Eurocentric, insensitive to race and gender, elitist, and exclusionary as well as reproducing the status quo and silencing the voices of those who would challenge this perspective. The AERC membership voted that the AAACE should produce a book devoted to race and feminist concerns in adult education. Eventually, Vanessa Sheared and Peggy Sissel (2001) agreed to co-edit the book. Because of lack of support, the co-editors withdrew the book

from the AAACE and called for papers, which yielded 54 chapter proposals. The resulting volume, entitled *Making Space*, includes 23 chapters addressing issues such as gender, race, culture, sexual orientation, ageism, ethnicity, and whiteness. This volume is primarily conceptual and not necessarily based on research in the formal sense but rather people's experiences.

Given the fact that, as noted previously, the learning preference literature does not report the diversity of the population of those studies, having the perspectives of the many contributors to volumes such as *Making Space* makes an important contribution to the field of adult education. It makes apparent the conceptual understandings and/or personal experiences of at least some women and people of color as well as those who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual about issues of gender, race, class, and culture. Further, the research literature has shown that diverse students have very different experiences in higher education. Also, as a result of the discussions in the field that gave rise to the book *Making Space* and the diversity and equity discourses in the wider field of education, there has been a great deal of discussion about what it means to teach for diversity and equity. The following section discusses primary discourses that address how this may be accomplished from a conceptual perspective. This will be followed by a consideration of the relatively limited data-based research studies that have been conducted around these issues in adult and higher education.

#### *Conceptual Literature on Dealing with Diversity and Equity Issues*

The concern with difference based on gender, race, class, and culture in adult education needs to be situated in the wider societal discussions of

feminism, civil rights, and antiracist efforts and in the wider discussion of these issues in K-12 education and higher education. As a result of the Civil Rights movement, there was an educational response among K-12 and educational theorists and practitioners and in higher education about dealing with cultural difference that gave rise to the multicultural education movement and the development of various ethnic studies programs on college campuses in the late 1970s through to the current day. During the same period, the women's movement gave rise to women's studies programs and feminist pedagogy. In addition, Freire's literacy work in Brazil and the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970 provided information to educators at all levels of education about the role of education in the primarily class-based emancipatory struggle that ultimately gave rise to the critical pedagogy literature. Broadly speaking, the multicultural literature has primarily been concerned with race and ethnicity, the feminist literature has been more concerned with gender, while the critical pedagogy literature has been focused more on class. These discourses all affect one another in their ongoing development in that most are concerned with teaching for greater equity although each of these discourses tends to call attention to different social groups.

Differences often act as barriers to successful educational opportunities that could improve the quality of students' lives. A learning environment that considers the needs of all students is essential in order to provide an atmosphere where they can achieve to their potential. Equitable treatment for all students is important (Jenkins & Bainer, 1990). Educators need to be concerned about how to effectively serve diverse students. To promote an environment where all

students can be motivated to persist and achieve, colleges need to create an atmosphere that is accepting and in which all students, regardless of differences, are valued. Such an environment needs to permeate adult and higher education.

Each major variable within schools—culture, power relationships, the curriculum and materials, and attitudes and beliefs of staff—needs to change in order to promote educational equality for students from diverse groups. In recognition of the need to provide education that meets the needs of all students, not just those in the dominant culture, various discourses have developed that address how to provide an equal educational experience for diverse students, each focusing on a particular area of difference and how to meet the educational needs of diverse students. Some of those discourses—multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism, antiracist education, antioppressive education, culturally-relevant adult education, critical and feminist pedagogy—are discussed in the following sections.

*Multiculturalism, Critical Multiculturalism, Antiracist Education, and Antioppressive Education.* The term “multicultural education” is used here to encompass a broad array of approaches to education designed to meet the needs of a diverse group of students. Sleeter and Grant (1999) have classified efforts to achieve multicultural education by identifying a series of approaches. Although they were writing from a K-12 perspective, their framework is useful in classifying efforts to create multicultural education in adult and higher education. In fact, Tisdell (1995) includes this framework in her adult education monograph, *Creating Inclusive Adult Learning Environments*, as well as a similar stage approach proposed by Banks (1993). Sleeter and Grant provide the following five

classifications for multicultural education: (1) "teaching the exceptional and the culturally different approach," intended to equip all learners with the knowledge and skills needed to get a job; (2) "human relations approach," with the goal of fostering harmony among different cultural groups by promoting understanding and improved interpersonal skills; (3) "single-group studies approach," designed to empower oppressed groups by increasing understanding about the group and improving their status; (4) "multicultural education approach," including all groups in the curriculum, portraying them in a way they want to be known for promotion of social structural equality and respect for all groups; and (5) "education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist," which encourages learners to critically examine their own social circumstances so that they can achieve social structural equality. The first two approaches, "teaching the exceptional and the culturally different" and "human relations," do not deal with power relations. They focus primarily on understanding and getting along with one another. They do not take into account that some of us have more power in the culture because we are more representative of the dominant culture, and they fail to deal with issues such as racism and sexism. The last three approaches, "single group studies," "multicultural education," and "education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist," do deal with power relations; and these three taken together might broadly be called "critical" multicultural approaches, critical meaning that they do deal with power relations the same way that critical pedagogy deals with power relations based on class.

Critical multiculturalism assumes that multicultural education that simply involves learning about other cultures overlooks the issues of disadvantage and

discrimination (Chalmers, 2002). The goal of critical multiculturalism is to "expose conditions in which the complexities of race, class, and gender function in a rigid modernist world of conservative accountability and liberal 'feel good' approaches to schooling. This critical approach doesn't smother differences into sameness, but rather seeks common critical ground that would allow equity, empowerment . . ." (Brady & Kanpol, 2000, p. 42). In the pursuit of justice, critical multiculturalists promote the postmodern critical feminist position that embraces differences in positionality and links the politics of difference with the social politics of justice and equality (Brady & Kanpol, 2000).

Hanley (Tisdell, Hanley, & Taylor, 2000) states that critical multiculturalism "brings the discourse on race, social class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to the center of the story of who we are as a country to contest the half truths, lies, and mythology that has been put forth as story and contemporary social relationships" (p. 135). Critical multiculturalism is about dealing with power relations (Tisdell et al., 2000). Brady & Kanpol (2000), when speaking of the education of teachers to become critical multicultural educators, suggest that teachers should visit places such as homeless shelters and different socioeconomic neighborhoods. They encourage educators to think about how they reproduce social inequities and to work to create an educational environment that challenges the dominant culture and moves toward education in which all learners, regardless of positionality, are granted equal status. Critical multicultural education is an example of Sleeter and Grant's (1999) "education

that is multicultural and social reconstructionist,” which directly addresses power inequities by challenging learners to critically examine their own social circumstances and work for social structural equity.

Antiracist pedagogy sees racism as being created and sustained by social and political structures and has as its goal to "recognize, confront, challenge and oppose racist beliefs and practices directly" (Hodson & Dennick, 1994, p. 255). Hodson & Dennick distinguish between cultural diversity approaches, which deal with symptoms of racial injustices, and antiracist approaches, which confront the socio-political causes. Antiracist education is designed to empower learners so that they can take action to change the structural inequities. Some have argued that celebration of diversity is not enough; it must be a vigorous antiracist approach. Antiracism strives to reveal and combat racist attitudes and practices that result in an unequal distribution of opportunity, wealth, and power (Hodson & Dennick, 1994, p. 255). Antiracist education does take into account power relations and is focused on empowering learners so they can dismantle structural inequities; antiracist education is an example of Sleeter and Grant's (1999) "education that is multicultural and social reconstructive." Antiracist policies should include rules against racism and bias-free educational practices. It is important to get teachers to realize that if they are not working against racism they are in fact contributing to it (Donaldson, 1997).

Antioppressive education is intended to work against various forms of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism (Kumashiro, 2001). Kumashiro contends that school students have a partial knowledge of marginalized groups that is based on stereotypes and myths and that schools do



little to add to that knowledge. School curricula includes information that represents the voices of privileged people, mainly male, white, and heterosexual. The roles played by marginalized groups are not included in any significant way. Schools impart information as if it were objective facts rather than the interpretation of a particular author. This results in the hegemonic interpretation of historical events, science that represents those topics considered important by only the dominant group, and English classes that focus on authors and characters who are primarily white, American, middle class, male, and heterosexual. Exclusion of other groups gives the message that they are not important and perpetuates hegemonic beliefs. Students are taught to repeat the official knowledge that schools want them to learn, which closes off the possibility of learning what has not been learned yet. This does nothing to attain social equity. Kumashiro points out that educators who attempt to add different groups to the curriculum are not solving the problem because there are so many differences that it becomes impossible to be fully inclusive. Kumashiro recommends that educators teach students to be critics of what they are taught in school. For example, students can be taught to read with a critical eye asking how characters are marginalized or privileged by the readings. Students should be taught to be not only mathematicians and scientists but also to be critics of math and science. Kumashiro also recommends that teacher education prepare student teachers to look beyond the official knowledge they are being taught, looking for what is not included and what is not said. Antioppressive education is an example of Sleeter and Grant's (1999) multicultural education.

*Culturally Relevant Adult Education.* The literature on cultural relevance in education is based on the assumption that learners from already marginalized cultural backgrounds resist education that is based in the dominant culture (Guy, 1999), therefore, further marginalizing themselves. Guy cites Flannery as saying that adult education is no exception since it is based primarily on the white experience. Culturally-relevant education calls for adult educators to make their practice relevant by focusing on the positive aspects of learners' culture with the goal of empowering them to improve their sociocultural conditions. Culturally-relevant education provides an example of Sleeter and Grant's (1999) "multicultural education," the goal of which is to portray all groups in the curriculum in positive ways in order to promote equality and respect for all groups.

Since an important aspect of culture is defining who has power, Guy (1999) contends that change that would improve the status of marginalized people cannot take place as long as their cultures are not recognized as acceptable alternatives. Throughout history, women and people of color have been marginalized politically and economically by the dominant culture, which in this country has stemmed from Anglo-Western-European values. It is this dominant culture that has the power to determine culture (Guy, 1999), and groups outside the dominant culture are marginalized and oppressed. Adult education can play an important role in changing this. Inclusion is not enough; educational practices and goals must be questioned in order to adequately serve marginalized learners.

Archie-Booker, Cervero, and Langon (1999) provide an excellent example of how an educational program that was not culturally relevant to the intended learners was not successful by describing AIDS prevention programs that were intended for African-American women but that "ignored the sexual politics and social inequalities that often exist in the relationships of African-American women" (p. 164). Another example is Chicano students who were reported to reject adult basic education because their culture was disregarded. They were expected to embrace the dominant culture (Sparks, 2003). In order to be effective, such programs need to tune in to the needs and values of the intended participants.

Culturally-relevant education does focus on power relations and has as a major goal the empowerment of learners for the purpose of improving their social position. However, even though more culturally relevant education may motivate students to learn and consequently may empower them, this alone may not encourage learners to question structural inequities and take action to change existing power relations. Education needs to go further by making students aware that existing social and political structures can be changed and that they can be a part of implementing that change.

Guy (1999), whose work relies somewhat on the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) in K-12 education, asserts that culturally-relevant education is best achieved through experiential learning. He summarizes recommendations for adult educators to create a more culturally relevant educational environment by stating that educators should (a) suspend belief in their own culture and seek the meaning learners attach to the learning environment and challenge their own

beliefs about learners' cultures, (b) learn about learners and their cultures and use this to create an effective learning environment for all students, (c) ensure that curriculum does not include stereotypical material and that it encompasses learners' lived experiences, and (d) share power with learners and select communication and educational processes that are consistent with learners' cultures in order to maximize their participation and share power.

Guy (1999) talks about the importance of attending to culture to make it relevant to learners; however, in his book authors are responding only to how they deal with a single group of students. They do not deal with what happens when many groups are present in the classroom at one time, which is more likely to be the situation in the real world, which is a limitation of this approach.

*Critical and Feminist Pedagogy.* Although critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy differ, they have clearly influenced one another. Feminist pedagogy focuses primarily on issues of gender, primarily women's learning, although some do account for race, class, and sexual orientation differences. Critical pedagogy deals with structural factors focusing primarily on class (Tisdell, 1998). However, many feminist writers have noted the limitations of critical pedagogy for putting too much emphasis on rationality and not considering the effect of emotion on learning. Ellsworth (1989), for example, claims that since critical pedagogy is focused on rationality it serves to reproduce the dominant culture that has privileged rationality. Most recent writers (Sleeter & McLaren 1995; Tisdell, 1998) recognize that these bodies influence one another. As a result, bell hooks (1994) uses the term "engaged pedagogy" to refer to an intermingling of

critical and feminist pedagogy. Clearly, these two bodies of literature have influenced one another; and this is apparent in the poststructural feminist pedagogy mentioned later in this section (Tisdell, 1998).

As noted above, critical pedagogy focuses more on differences in class and economic condition; and those who espouse critical pedagogy view capitalist democracy as flawed by structural inequalities that can only be corrected by substantially changing the social system. Reproductionists (Apple, 1982; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) argue that capitalism reproduces the class structure, skills, values, and belief systems of the dominant culture through education in order to maintain the status quo allowing those who acquire this cultural capital to have an advantage in the existing social and economic order, hence creating an oppressed group of people who do not possess this cultural capital. Critical pedagogy encourages the empowerment through education of those who are oppressed instead of allowing education to reproduce the dominant class structure.

Critical pedagogy has as its root the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian adult educator, who witnessed oppression in Latin America. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1996) makes it clear that the purpose of education should be to help learners gain critical consciousness so that they can take control of their lives. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument by which oppressed people can become aware of their oppression and their oppressors and learn that the existing state does not need to remain constant. Freire bemoans the predominant model of education where teachers are the knowledgeable who narrate while students listen to this knowledge, which may

lack meaning to them and appear irrelevant to the context of their lives. He refers to this as the banking concept of education where the teacher deposits information while students store it to be withdrawn at a later date rather than developing the critical consciousness that would enable them to transform their world. In Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, program development starts with the world of the learners and their aspirations.

Freire contends that the oppressed must recognize their oppression and then intervene to throw off that oppression. They cannot rely on others to do this for them since others who are part of the dominant culture will not be likely to disrupt the status quo, which serves their interests. In fact, the oppressed help to maintain the status quo by doing nothing to change it. According to Freire, the purpose of education is to provide all learners with an awareness of their situation and a knowledge that they can change their circumstances. He contends that this can be achieved by assisting students to become critical thinkers and promoting social change.

The teacher's role in critical pedagogy is to facilitate the dawning critical awareness of the oppressed to their situation. Teachers must encourage students to be partners with them and create a two-way communication so that authentic thinking can take place. Both the teachers and the students must work together to achieve emancipation of the learners. The role of learners is commitment and involvement in throwing off oppression by producing and acting upon their own ideas, not the ideas of the teacher. The learners must develop a critical perception of the world and work with teachers to help uncover major themes in their lives to be addressed.

Freire suggests that adult educators use the problem-posing method in which the educator “constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students” (p. 63). Problem-posing education involves enlisting volunteers from among the population to help uncover the themes to be addressed. Then, psychologists and sociologists decode the information and challenge the participants and pose problems. Teachers study records of the decoding session and prepare materials such as films, tapes, slides, and reading materials. Dramatization and critique of magazine and newspaper articles are also effective techniques. The goal in problem-posing education is an emergence of consciousness and critical intervention. People begin to see the world not as static but as a reality in progress. This method presents students’ situations to them as problems to be solved so that they can see that transformation is possible. The methodology must be dialogical, designed to discover the learner’s view of the world and its generative themes, the major themes of the learner’s life, and to stimulate the learner’s awareness regarding these themes, which will be the focus of action.

Freire’s critical pedagogy has a noble purpose—dedication to educating the common people for the purpose of improving their situation. This is in line with the strong tradition in adult education of aiding people to advance themselves; in critical pedagogy, this advancement is focused on the collective, not the individual. Another strength of Freire’s work is that he outlines steps that can be used in working with oppressed groups, his problem-posing approach. A weakness of Freire’s critical pedagogy is that he perceives oppression as a class or economic oppression. He doesn’t deal to any great extent with oppression

based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and other differences; Freire's techniques could be used to benefit people who suffer from all forms of oppression.

Ira Shor (1996) drew on Freire's critical pedagogy work when he addressed class issues in the classroom, whereas feminist pedagogy authors tend to draw more on authors who deal with women as learners (Hayes & Flannery, 2000) and women's studies (Maher & Tetreault, 1994, 1996). However, a single model of feminist pedagogy does not exist (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Various schemes have been used to organize feminist pedagogy (Maher, as cited in Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Tisdell, 1998, 2000). Tisdell's model provides an overview of feminist pedagogy by identifying three different strands—psychological, structural, and poststructural.

The psychological strand, focusing on women's psychological development, stems from the work of Belenky et al. (1986) in *Women's Ways of Knowing* in which the authors uncovered evidence of the importance of relationships and connectedness to the learning process in adulthood, especially for women but not limited to women. This strand of feminist pedagogy is focused on women's educational needs as individuals and does not examine power relations or have concern for collective social change; therefore, there is virtually no connection between this strand of feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy (Tisdell, 1998, 2000).

The structural strand of feminist pedagogy focuses on examining social structures of gender, race, and class as they relate to the learning of women. This strand examines how power, privilege, and oppression affect learning and



encourages the instructor to proactively confront power relations based on gender, race, and class in order to make these structures apparent to learners. Both Freire (1970, 1996) and hooks (1989, 1994), in their critical pedagogy work, have influenced this structural strand. Structural feminist pedagogy focuses on power by examining how the traditional curriculum has marginalized women and people of color (Tisdell, 1998, 2000).

The third strand of feminist pedagogy, according to Tisdell (1998, 2000), is termed poststructural and focuses on how "social structures of gender, race, and class inform our individual identity and development and on how these can be analyzed and reframed in educational settings to facilitate working for social change" (p. 157). In the structural strand, the focus is on social structure; in the poststructural strand, issues of positionality are the focus—the positionality of the instructor as well as the learners. Deconstructing how each of us has been constructed through our socialization is a key part of poststructural feminist thought, which encourages learners to construct their own version of truth based on their own positionality. Identities are viewed as constantly shifting. The poststructural feminist instructor encourages learners to deal not only with their positionality but to take action. Educators take proactive roles as challengers of unequal power relations, not merely facilitators. Poststructural feminist educators include emotions as well as critical-thinking skills and take into consideration their own positionality as authority figures and its impact as they deal with learners. This strand of feminist pedagogy takes into consideration power relations and encourages action to change structural systems that oppress people.

Hayes and Flannery (2000) contend that their thinking is from the poststructural feminist perspective in *Women as Learners*, where they set out to compile and critique literature on women as learners in order to make it more accessible to those who have an interest in the learning of women. They were motivated in their work because they found that adult and continuing education practitioners showed a limited understanding of the kinds of learning situations that might be beneficial to women. They argue that gender has received little attention in adult learning theory and that gender is, in fact, a type of social relation that is in a state of constant change. Gender has an impact on how people learn and on what they focus in the learning environment. In addition, other characteristics that differ among women, such as race, cause different women to learn and react differently.

Theories of learning and teaching are biased in favor of certain values and cultural norms, which may be inconsistent with the needs of many women as well as many men. Hayes and Flannery (2000) chose to write about women as learners out of a commitment to include women's learning and strive for political and social justice by challenging unequal relationships of power and authority that pervade scholarship and practice in education.

When they researched the literature concerning women's learning in adulthood, Hayes and Flannery (2000) found that little of what existed was informed by feminist theories and of that they found a tendency to draw on the psychological perspectives of feminism. Therefore, they contend that the existing research fails to look at the sociological perspectives of feminism that take into consideration issues of sexism in the power relations involved in learning.

Factors such as race, class, culture, and sexual orientation are basically not considered in the existing research. Although Hayes and Flannery include authors who subscribe to each of the perspectives of feminism, they state that their thinking is most closely aligned with the poststructural perspective, which portrays gender as a system of continually renegotiated social relations. This perspective allows for differences among women based on factors such as age, race, class, and sexual orientation.

Hayes and Flannery (2000) researched women's learning through the analysis of women's stories rather than through traditional research methods and the following key themes and chapters emerged: women's learning of social contexts, self-esteem and identity, voice, connection, and transformation.

When discussing feminist pedagogy, Tisdell (1995) summarizes her suggestions for creating an inclusive learning environment. She calls for the integration of affective and experiential knowledge with theoretical concepts and attention to the power relations inherent in the production of knowledge. She urges educators to be aware that learners are positioned differently in the educational environment and that the difference in power between the teacher and students should be acknowledged. Educators should identify all stakeholders and their positionality in the educational program as well as consider the degree to which the curriculum and their own behavior challenge or reproduce structured power relations. Lastly, educators should strive to create a democratic classroom by building an environment that is open and intellectually rigorous.

*Similarities and Differences of Discourses.* Each of these approaches—critical multiculturalism, antiracist pedagogy, antioppressive education, cultural

relevance, critical pedagogy, and feminist pedagogy—focuses on particular differences: cultural relevance on cultural differences; antiracist pedagogy on racial differences; antioppressive education on differences such as race, class, gender, and sexual preference; critical multiculturalism and feminist pedagogy on differences of gender, race, and class; and critical pedagogy on class. Each approach attempts to promote an educational environment that is more inclusive and that promotes social and political equality regardless of differences. Each discourse, in its own way, has the underlying goal of promoting a more equal education that can be instrumental in improving the conditions of people who are marginalized because of their differences. The various discourses attend to power in differing degrees and the manner in which they suggest creating equality.

Attention to issues of power varies among the different approaches as well as how equality might be achieved. The literature on cultural relevance speaks of making the content of education more relevant to the culture of marginalized students thereby motivating them to engage in education, which should empower them to improve their social conditions. Antioppressive education urges students to be critics of what they are taught in school with a focus on how marginalized groups are represented in the curriculum and challenging what is presented as official knowledge. Antiracist pedagogy also has the goal of empowering learners but speaks more directly of challenging power structures and uncovering and attacking racist beliefs that act to create and sustain inequities. The literature on critical multiculturalism brings to the forefront issues of race, social class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and teaches learners to challenge their own

privilege and asks teachers to take an active role in bringing to light the power structures that create and sustain marginalization and to encourage students to challenge their own privilege. Critical multiculturalism is about dealing with power relations and encourages teachers to become aware of how they reproduce social inequities and to seek ways to expose them. Critical pedagogy is focused on helping oppressed people to become aware of their oppression and gain control of their own destinies rather than being subject to the interests of the dominant culture.

The various strands of feminist pedagogy—psychological, structural, and poststructural (Tisdell, 1998, 2000)—place varying degrees of emphasis on issues of power. The psychological strand does not attend to power issues and the need for social change. It is focused on women’s psychological differences and how they need to be educated differently. The structural strand does focus on power, examining how power, privilege, and oppression affect learning and how social structures of gender, race, and class relate to women’s learning. The poststructural strand addresses power by considering the positionality of both the learners and the instructors and goes further by encouraging learners to take action and encouraging educators to be proactive in challenging unequal power relations. All of the discourses included in this review of the conceptual literature urge educators to revise their educational practices to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The next section reviews research that was conducted for the purpose of determining how the dynamics of gender, race, class, and culture act upon the lives of adult learners.

*Research Dealing with the Effects of Gender, Race, Class, and Culture on Learning*

Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1998) note that because education "does not occur on a neutral stage," educators and learners "bring with them their positions in the hierarchies that order the world, including those based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation and disability" (p. 389) into the classroom. Because power relationships are present everywhere in society, as Tisdell (1993) suggests, these power relationships are often reproduced and maintained through the educational process. Schools reproduce unequal relations based on gender and race (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1989) in many ways, including the curriculum of adult education, which represents the white world view. Johnson-Bailey & Cervero (1998) cite Sork, who contends that educators need to be aware of these dynamics in order to avoid reproducing existing power structures and overcome the "environmental baggage" (p. 390) learners bring into the classroom. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero urge educators to view learners as individuals with differing amounts of power based on their positions in the outside world. Learners' cultures have a significant impact on their learning experiences as do their gender, race, and class. Teachers should become more aware of these issues and work to overcome their own hegemony. They need to pay attention to learners' cultures and differences as they go about the business of educating the diverse students in today's college classrooms. This issue is an important aspect of this study of adult students in higher education. Following is a review of research literature that explicitly deals with how students' gender, race, class, and culture issues affect their learning. Most of the studies were

discovered by searching Dissertation Abstracts International, Educational Resources Index Clearinghouse, and ProQuest Education Complete using various combinations of the following terms: gender, race, class, culture, higher education, adult education, and learning. The studies are organized based on the particular aspect of positionality being addressed.

*Gender.* Gilligan (1982) draws attention to differences based on gender in her groundbreaking study in which she distinguishes between the development of men and women and argues that most women's sense of self is built around affiliations and relationships, while men develop a sense of self based on separateness, putting more importance on accomplishment. There is a tendency for women to have a nurturant quality that focuses on caring relationships and attachment and that gives them a different perception of life from that of men. This different development of women may help to explain why Belenky et al. (1986) found that women learn in a more connected way than men, who are more separate. Women learn through connections, involvement, and caring and put more importance on relationships than do men. With the work of Gilligan and Belenky et al. as a backdrop, Beer and Darkenwald (1989) administered the Adult Classroom Environment Scale (ACES) (Darkenwald, 1987; Darkenwald & Valentine, 1986) to measure adult students' perceptions of the classroom social environment and found that women perceive more affiliation and involvement in the classroom than do men. It should be noted, however, that this different way of learning described by Belenky et al. is not restricted to women nor does it necessarily apply to all women. As discussed by many contributors in the 1996

volume by Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, and Belenky, some women contend that they prefer the style normally attributed to men while some men prefer a more connected form of learning. The work of Gilligan, Belenky et al., and Beer and Darkenwald does not address issues of power, but rather is limited to psychological differences that distinguish women's ways of knowing.

Maier and Tetreault (1994, 1996) report on an ethnographic study of the classrooms of 17 feminist college professors at six universities nationwide. In *The Feminist Classroom*, they examined the teaching and learning that was taking place in women's studies as well as classes that were concerned with issues of pedagogy as well as course content, which they determined were inextricably intertwined in the construction of knowledge. They moved away from the focus on individual development that was portrayed in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986) and toward the social construction of classroom knowledge. Maier and Tetreault view students as having multiple positions in society that are shifting and relational and argue that multicultural classrooms can be created through "pedagogies of positionality" (1994, p. 229), using the idea of constructed knowing as a point of departure.

*The Feminist Classroom* provides insight into the different college classroom experience of female students although it also attends to differences based on characteristics such as race, class, and sexual orientation. Maier and Tetreault (1994) point out that gender cannot be viewed as a single component of one's positionality but that students have multiple facets to their positionality involving other characteristics such as race, class, and sexual orientation.



Although the classes studied were made up predominantly of traditional age students, the issues discussed here are likely to pertain to adult students as well.

Maier and Tetreault (1994) contend that positional knowing is restricted by the academic disciplines as well as the institutional structure, in the sense of authority of the professor. Traditional classrooms and grading schemes restrict positional knowing because instructors feel compelled to teach a specific body of knowledge. Institutions reflect the inequalities based on characteristics such as social class, race, and gender. Larger state universities, partly because of their larger classes, tend to offer less opportunity for positional knowing because of factors such as large class sizes, lecture formats, and less opportunity for writing. These institutions, which have a larger population of already marginalized students, offer fewer liberal arts and humanities courses and more career-oriented courses. Therefore, many students have less of a chance to understand their positions within an unequal social structure.

What pedagogical approaches might promote a pedagogy of positionality? Approaches that allow students to explore their own ideas, which are affected by their positionality, without interference from the instructor, allowing students to openly discuss ideas and transform their positions. Typically, positional understandings are blocked in the classroom. What has traditionally been accepted as knowledge might be changed by a pedagogy of positionality.

Some of the instructors in the study attempt to share authority in the classroom with their students, encouraging them to tell their stories and experiences and even help design the course. Some instructors stimulate discussion through assigning appropriate readings, posing relevant questions, or

using material from students' journals. Talking about teaching and learning as teaching and learning are taking place can make students conscious of their roles in knowledge creation. A pedagogy of positionality is better achieved in small classes where discussion and analysis can take place rather than in large classes. The authors envision a less individualistic and more communal learning environment that brings together different groups of people within the classroom. Students need to become aware that knowledge is socially constructed and contextual if they are going to engage in constructing knowledge from their own points of view.

*Gender and Race.* The power structures and privilege of the outside world based on gender, race, class, and color were found to exist in the educational setting when the effects of gender and race in the experiences of black women re-entering higher education were examined (Johnson-Bailey, 2001; Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 1996). The eight participants in her narrative study did experience the effects of oppression based on gender, race, and class, though they experienced more oppression based on race in their educational experience and more gender oppression in their personal lives in helping them deal with education. They dealt with such oppression by sometimes being silent, by sometimes overtly resisting it, and sometimes by finding other ways of negotiating it.

Interesting power dynamics associated with both gender and race that directly impacted students' learning were discovered in a study of two graduate courses, one taught by a white male professor and the other by a black woman (Johnson-Bailey, & Cervero, 1998). Student comments indicated that they were

aware of the power dynamics created by both the positionality of the individual students as well as that of the teacher. The positionality of the teachers had the greatest impact in classroom dynamics and race had the greatest effect—whiteness being the most important. The white male professor's knowledge and authority were not challenged while the black female professor was questioned and doubted, especially by male students. In addition, the female professor was expected to be nurturing rather than firm. This study shows how the positionality of both learners and professors can impact students' learning.

The intersection of gender and race was also present when Aiken et al. (2001) studied black students in an RN completion program to learn what factors encouraged their participation and what discouraged them. The women were encouraged on the intrapersonal level by a belief in God and/or spirituality and the potential for social mobility and previous nursing experience. They were discouraged by perceptions of themselves as the "other" as well as institutionalized racism.

Tisdell (1993) designed a study to determine how power relations based primarily on gender but including race, class, and age were reproduced or resisted in higher education by both students and professors. A male and a female professor challenged traditional power relations in their classrooms. However, both the professors and students did things to reproduce the dominant power relations probably because they have been socialized to do so. The study concluded that students who are privileged by their positionality based on gender, race, class, and culture have more power in the classroom and that the male professor had more power than the female professor.

*Class.* Ira Shor's (1996) work with working-class, first-generation college students at the City University of New York, although not research in the formal sense, is notable. He worked to structure his curriculum and teaching practices in a way that would teach his working-class students, who had little power, to become empowered to take action to control their circumstances. He attempted to share power in the structuring of the curriculum and classroom activities so that students could acquire the skills needed to participate in a democracy. Guided by the marginalization that they were accustomed to, these students were apprehensive about taking power and initially resisted Shor's attempts to share power with them in the workings of the classroom.

*Class and Gender.* The effects of class and gender were studied by Maneval (2000) who shed considerable light on how working-class women's positionality affected their life choices and goals. Dominant social discourses associated with gender, race, and class influenced these women's relationships with families and schools. The working-class women in this study, who were enrolled as students in a community college, reported the influence of parents, schools, peers, and male partners in forming their identities. Parents' expectations of these working-class women were that they would become mothers and partners even if they did work. Work for them was viewed as a financial undertaking, not a path to fulfillment. This was reinforced by the example of their mothers, who while not discouraging their daughters from pursuing higher education did not encourage them. Even girls who did have aspirations toward higher education gave them up as unrealistic and financially

unfeasible. The general attitude was that higher education was not for women. In addition, parents' attitudes that women were not very intelligent produced self doubt in many of the women.

Schools were complicit in discouraging these working-class girls from pursuing higher education by placing them in non-college preparatory courses, which reinforced the message they were receiving from their families—they were not very smart and should concentrate on mothering and partnering. In addition, male partners exhibited a similar attitude by expecting them to prioritize the needs of the men and children above their own. In addition, about half of the women in this study reported emotional or physical abuse from their male partners.

A diminished view of working-class women was again uncovered in a study of white and black adult basic education students who accepted class stratification and domination through a false dichotomy of common sense and intelligence (Luttrell, 1989). The white working-class women named only men as examples of intelligent people, claiming women had only common sense and equated men's skilled manual work and men's self-learned activities, such as reading or playing music, with intelligence. They never mentioned women's manual work or activities as examples of intelligence. The women referred to women's knowledge as relating to feelings; whereas, men's knowledge they related to thoughts.

A difference between black and white working-class women emerged in Luttrell's (1989) study of black women who did not connect intelligence with manual work. They referred to common sense as related to solving family

problems and cited both men and women as possessing common sense skills of keeping the family together. Because they struggled to keep the family together, they did not as readily dismiss their skills as unimportant; and they did relate women's family-related work to intelligence. In this study, white working-class men's craft knowledge emerged as more legitimate and powerful in the hierarchy of knowledge, similar to scientific knowledge in that it is acquired through collective experience and consensual agreement on what constitutes a fact. Bingham (1995), while studying Appalachian women, found that the patriarchy found in formal education, work, and the family also occurred in community learning situations such as community centers, the church, and activist groups.

Although schooling is one of the few avenues by which working-class women can achieve upward mobility and power, it causes a strain on their ties with working-class culture, which expects them to fill the role of mother and partner. Educators of adult women face a special challenge in motivating working-class women and providing the support they need to continue their educational pursuits.

*Culture and diversity.* Cultural factors were discovered to have both a positive and negative effect on the experiences of Anglophone Caribbean immigrant women in U.S. postsecondary education (Alfred, 2003). The strong regard for education that they acquired in their home country was found to be a positive factor in motivating these women to participate in higher education. However, in the U. S. college setting, they found themselves in discourse

communities that were not sensitive to their cultural differences and experienced marginality, alienation, and isolation, which had a negative impact on their educational experience.

The culture of Chicano(a) adults contributed to rejection of adult basic education and English literacy programs because the programs recreated pedagogy and curriculum of earlier educational experiences in which they had failed. In order to participate in these programs, the adult students were required to choose between the dominant culture and their ethnic heritage. As teachers tried to socialize the Chicano students into the dominant culture, they resisted participation in the programs (Sparks, 2003).

Most of the above authors are talking specifically about adult students in adult education or higher education settings, whereas other authors have done studies related to diversity particularly related to higher education, the most comprehensive of which is a study by Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002), which examined the effects of having diverse peers in the classroom on student outcomes for overall learning and participation in democracy at the University of Michigan as well as other institutions. They reported that “the actual experiences students have with diversity consistently and meaningfully affect important learning and democracy outcomes of a college education” (p. 358). As support for this position, Gurin et al. quote an amicus brief filed on behalf of the University of Michigan by General Motors, which states,

Diversity in academic institutions is essential to teaching students the human relations and analytic skills they need to thrive and lead in the work environments of the twenty-first century. These skills include the abilities

to work well with colleagues and subordinates from diverse backgrounds; to view issues from multiple perspectives; and to anticipate and respond with sensitivity to the needs and cultural differences of highly diverse customers, colleagues, employers, and global business partners. (p. 361)

*Summary.* The research literature cited above provides examples of how positionality can impact adult students as they engage in educational pursuits. Differences based on gender, race, class, and culture often act as barriers to successful educational opportunities. Some of these studies provide examples of how unequal power relations are reproduced by our educational system. The study by Gurin et al. supports the argument for a diverse student population on college campuses.

The literature addressing the ways that women learn has brought to our attention that not only do some women prefer a more connected, relational style of learning but some men may prefer this style as well. Studies have also shown that adult students may be marginalized in the educational environment because of gender and race, which may deter women and people of color from attaining their full educational potential. Gender and race differences in teachers also affect the way they are viewed in the classroom.

Class plays a part in the educational experience as well. Working class students, because of their customarily marginalized status, often find it hard to assume power. Working class women's educational experiences are impacted by the messages they receive from their families, their schools, and society in general telling them that they should pursue roles as mothers and partners and



not aspire to educational achievement. Cultural differences also act to marginalize students in the educational setting. Being different from the dominant culture can act as a barrier to successful educational experiences.

### The Importance of Caring

While not initially planned as part of the literature review, the desire for a caring instructor emerged as important to the participants in this study of the learning preferences of adult community college students. This finding prompted a review of the literature on caring in the classroom since caring is not explicitly discussed in the learning preferences literature nor in the diversity literature.

Nel Noddings (1992) is very well known for her work on the importance of caring to the educational process. Writing from the perspective of K-12 education, she argues that the main goal of education should be "nurturing the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable persons" (p. vii). She contends that a liberal education with all its prescribed courses is not the best education for everyone and that the school system has been dehumanized. Noddings argues for putting the human dimension back by instituting a curriculum centered around caring because as human beings we need to care and be cared for, something that is lacking in our culture today. She defines being cared for as being understood and respected and emphasizes that caring does not imply that academic excellence should not be considered important.

However, if the emphasis in schools is limited to only academic achievement, it may contribute to the feeling that we as people are not cared for, that we are just instruments in a race for national achievement. Noddings

questions whether liberal education is political maneuvering, referring to an "ideology of control" (p. xii) that forces students to study subjects that they may not even care about. She argues for the acknowledgement of students' abilities that are largely ignored in schools today, many of which are associated with women.

Noddings cites Dewey who argued years ago that teachers had to start with the experience and interests of students and forge connections with the subject matter. Noddings contends that there are few things that all students need to know and that students should be able to choose some of what they learn over other things. To illustrate, Noddings urges us to think of a large, heterogeneous family with differences in ethnicity, intellectual and physical abilities, and interests. She contends that we should respect their individual differences while assuring that they learn certain things essential to a successful life. She refers to a moral education that focuses on producing moral people as well as being moral in purpose, policy, and methods. Noddings argues that this moral purpose in education, which involves caring for each child, should be at the forefront of education.

Noddings contends that instead of promoting only academic rigor, the first job of the schools should be to care for our children. "We should educate all our children not only for competence but for caring. Our aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and loveable people" (p. xiv). Noddings (1984) adds that teachers should not only care about their students but they

should also help students learn to care for others and refers to Gilligan's (1982) "ethic of caring." Noddings describes four major components of teaching from an ethic of caring: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation.

Modeling refers to teachers showing students how to care by caring for them. She describes dialogue (similar to Freire, 1970) in an ethic of caring as open-ended and contends that dialogue is important in connecting us to each other and helps to maintain caring relations. Noddings, when speaking of practice, states that attitudes are shaped in part by experience and advocates that students be given opportunities to care, which some schools provide by requiring community service. Confirmation, the final component of an ethic of caring, is described as encouraging the development of what we perceive to be good in people.

Noddings (1984, 1986) believes that teachers' classroom decisions should be grounded in an ethic of caring and argues that an ethic of caring should be not only at the heart of teaching but also an integral part of teacher education and research on teaching. She developed a theoretical model (1984) of care-centered teacher education in which she refers to modeling and points out that preservice teachers need to be treated with the same care that we want them to show to their students.

Although Noddings' work originally centered on K-12 education, it has application with adult students as well. Conceptual literature and research can be found in the fields of adult and higher education that focuses on a caring relationship between the teacher and the student. Although the word caring may

not be explicitly used by all the authors, various terms are used to emphasize the importance of the relationship between the teacher and the student. Following is a review of some of that literature.

Much of the literature on caring is directly related to Carol Gilligan's (1977) work on moral development that found women's moral development organized around responsibility and care. Those who ascribe to a morality of responsibility and care tend to reject the idea that blind justice and impartiality are the answer to resolving differences; rather they call for evaluating the context and each individual's particular experience. Building on the work of Gilligan, Belenky et al. (1986) conducted a qualitative study of 135 women who represented a diverse cross section of social class, education, and experience to understand women's ways of knowing and how they construct knowledge. The results of this study were consistent with the findings of Gilligan (1977). Belenky et al. found that most of the participants in their study ascribed to a morality of responsibility and care.

The results of Belenky et al.'s (1986) study indicate that many women need confirmation and connectedness as well as nurturing in their learning environment. Women want "connected teaching" that includes treating learners courteously as equals. The women in this study did not want an education in which knowledge flowed in one direction. They wanted a teacher who would help them articulate and build upon their latent knowledge. Belenky et al. refer to this as a "midwife teacher" who draws out the knowledge rather than depositing it into the learner, which is the case with the banker teacher. The midwife-teacher does not anesthetize the learner creating passive spectators but supports the student

in the emergence of consciousness. The midwife teacher assists students in developing their own thoughts. This kind of classroom would involve a relational community rather than a style of debate. In a connected classroom, students get to know one another and support one another. Connected teachers welcome diversity of opinion. It is apparent that the “midwife teacher” would rely on the building of relationships within the classroom.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999), drawing on the work of the authors cited above, speak of an ethic of care in relation to adult education, saying “The ethic of care is seen in adult learning programs in the mutual respect between learners and instructors and in how we empower all in our work environments, learners and staff alike, to be all that they can be” (p. 375). They contend that “Developing and maintaining caring relationships through an ethic of care as an instructor or program planner is a very time-consuming commitment, especially when working with others who are reluctant to adopt a culture that embraces care as foundational to practice” (p. 375). They outline how adult educators working from an ethic of care would design a program.

Noddings (1992) points out that some educational theorists focus on the comparison of various teaching methods, ignoring the fact that teachers and students differ, and that other educational theorists contend we should not regard teachers as interchangeable instructional instruments. Noddings argues that it is important to consider who the teacher is, who the students are, and what they are trying to accomplish both separately and together. From a research perspective, Cranton and Carusetta (2004) conducted a study of 22 teachers

who were seen as “authentic teachers” by their colleagues. They express a similar view to Noddings pointing out that the resources for helping teachers to learn about teaching often do not take into account characteristics of the teacher such as personality and values, characteristics of teachers that they refer to as “authentic.”

Cranton and Carusetta (2004) found that the participants in their study noted that part of authenticity in teaching is to communicate with students in a genuine way. They also found that these authentic teachers critically reflect on the norms of teaching and reject those they do not accept.

One of the major themes that emerged from Cranton and Carusetta’s study was “relationship,” which “was broadly defined to include helping students learn, caring for students, engaging in dialogue, and being aware of exercising power” (p. 15). The authors reported “an intense and powerful sense of caring about students and their learning” (p. 16) from the teachers they studied. The authors suggest that a person who has an awareness of relationships between teacher and student is one who is more likely to care for students, be interested in helping them to learn and engage in dialogue with them. Such a person is more likely to “share aspects of the self with students, be conscious of how power is exercised, and have considered the degree of personal connection with students that is comfortable” (p. 20). Cranton and Carusetta explain that it is these characteristics that provide a description of authenticity in teaching. They cite Jarvis and Freire both of whom “saw authenticity as concerned not only with the self but also and perhaps most important, with how we relate to students” (p 21). Cranton and Carusetta make a clear statement about the connection

between caring and being authentic as a teacher. They said, “We cannot be authentic in teaching and ignore or not care about students, for that is what teaching is—helping others to learn” (p. 21).

Cranton and Carusetta’s (2004) study on authenticity in teachers to some degree gets at the role of caring in the teacher-student relationship, but many other authors in adult education have either implicitly or explicitly discussed the importance of a caring relationship in teaching. Apps (1996), for example, focuses on the interpersonal nature of teaching when he urges educators to “teach from the heart.” He emphasizes that in addition to what the teacher knows it is who the teacher is that makes a difference. Like Cranton and Carusetta, Apps speaks of being authentic, indicating that teachers should ask if what they are doing is truly an expression of who they are. Apps contends that educators who teach from the heart strive to touch the hearts of learners, to make connections.

Apps emphasizes that teaching from the heart does not involve throwing out effective teaching techniques but builds upon them, taking them deeper. “Teaching from the heart means teaching from the depths of who we are with the hope that we will touch the hearts of those with whom we work. To begin discovering the core of who we are requires that we work to become aware of our beliefs and values” (p. 63). Teaching from the heart focuses on relationships, especially between the teacher and students. Apps speaks of providing an environment that is conducive to learning, one involving the physical setting as well as encouraging teachers and students to share openly and trust one

another. In essence, then, teaching from the heart implies that the teacher cares about the students and their success enough to create a relationship with them that benefits their learning by going beyond subjects and techniques.

Bell hooks (1994) also speaks of the importance of the relationship between the teacher and student to effective teaching. She expresses concern that schools are practicing the “banking” system of education that involves teachers depositing information into the brains of students with the intent that it can be withdrawn at a later date. She stresses that this type of education stifles critical thinking and encourages students to accept the traditional knowledge that has been handed down by the dominant culture.

Hooks’ proposes an “engaged pedagogy” and speaks of relationships and caring in the classroom. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) encourages a form of teaching that promotes intellectual and spiritual growth in addition to imparting information. She said, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary condition where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (pp. 14-15). She argues that students have a right to expect teaching to make a connection between what is being learned and their own life experiences.

One fundamental technique of hooks’ “engaged pedagogy” is that teaching should never be boring. Hooks proposes a classroom that is dynamic and exciting and says that to generate excitement teacher and student must be interested in hearing one another’s voice. This concern for a classroom that



invites students to engage with the teacher and other learners in constructing knowledge and engage in critical thinking implies an ethic of care on the part of the teacher.

Parker Palmer (1998) also speaks of the relationship aspect of teaching when he states, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). He expresses a concern that we live in a world where we are disconnected from ourselves, our subjects, and our students. Palmer speaks of students’ fear as well as the fear of the teacher, which he says act to disconnect the teacher and student. He speaks of the dominant culture of objectivism, which he says devalues our emotions and inner life.

Palmer says that teaching should not involve just imparting a lot of facts but rather it should focus on creating a space for conversation about the subject between teacher and student. Palmer recommends discussion as a means of engaging students and describes the teacher as a facilitator who makes the subject relevant to the students. Similar to Noddings (1992) and Cranton and Carusetta (2004), Palmer also rejects the idea that good teaching is only about techniques. He claims that to address the disconnectedness of modern society, teachers should reconnect with their true calling and then “weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves” (p. 11).

Palmer speaks of the inner landscape of the teaching self, which includes three paths—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. He defines the emotional path as “the way we and our students feel as we teach and learn—feelings that can

either enlarge or diminish the exchange between us” (pp. 4-5), which obviously implies a sense of caring between the teacher and student. Palmer contends that “in lecture halls, seminar rooms, field settings, labs, and even electronic classrooms” (p. 6) the teacher has the power to “help students learn a great deal—or keep them from learning much at all” (p. 6). Palmer urges teachers to be sensitive to the students’ needs and allow free discussion among students as long as the goals of the lesson are met. Palmer’s concerns speak to the importance of relationships and emotions in providing a meaningful education to students. While he doesn’t directly use the term “caring” in emphasizing the importance of connection and relationship, he implicitly is getting at the essence of caring.

Similarly, Druger (1998) speaks of the importance of the relationship between the teacher and students when suggesting guidelines for undergraduate teaching saying, “The ultimate pathway to learning boils down to the interaction between teacher and student” (p. 4). He continues by saying, “We all forget information that we learn, and the most important learning outcomes are those that influence the student’s life 20 years after that student has experienced our course” (p. 4).

The issue of caring on the part of the teacher has also come up as a research finding in several studies. As a result, Beck (2001) carried the idea of an ethic of caring into the education of nurses advocating caring practices between faculty and nursing students. A 1990 revolution in nursing curriculum called for caring to be the core value in nursing school curricula and called for enhancing caring through relationships between faculty and students and among

faculty themselves. Beck conducted a metasynthesis of 14 qualitative research studies that were conducted during the 1990s to determine what was discovered about the experience of caring within schools of nursing. She stated, "The data suggest a trickling down effect starting with faculty caring for each other then moving on to faculty caring for students, students caring for each other, and finally students caring for their patients" (p. 108). Beck makes a strong argument for modeling caring by saying "Once caring was personally experienced, faculty and students seem to have a strong desire to care for others" (p. 108). Noddings (1984) included modeling as the first component in teaching from an ethic of caring.

Caring emerged as important in a study of 116 junior-level elementary education majors that asked who were the best teachers they ever had in order to determine what it is about some teachers that cause their former students to describe them as inspirational (Burke & Nierenbert, 1998). One of the select few characteristics that emerged as meaningful to the majority of respondents was caring. This study concluded that teachers exhibited caring by being available and willing to help students with their social, psychological, emotional, physical, and academic needs. Respondents in this study said caring teachers get to know students, attend to their needs, and respond to their accomplishments. In the words of Goodlad (1984), "Teaching is a profession based primarily on relationships" (p. 353).

Rogers and Webb (1991) studied teachers asking them to talk about good teaching and describe qualities of good teachers. A recurring theme was that good teachers care. Teachers repeatedly included caring in their discussions of

good teachers. These respondents spoke of good teachers as interacting and relating to students and the students relating to the teachers. They said that caring teachers encourage dialogue and are sensitive to students' needs and interests and that caring teachers make school fun, not boring, by providing engaging and meaningful material and activities. They described caring as more than just caring for the students but using that caring as a basis for educational decision making. Rogers and Webb cited Mayeroff: "With caring at the heart of the work that teachers do, all their activities should be based on it; all of their actions should be considered in terms of their impact on the welfare of their students." Rogers and Webb also cite Kohn as saying that teachers have an obligation to care about all their students, loving them as learners, and making sound decisions about their educational needs.

Noddings (1992) contends that most teachers do care but some are not able to create a caring relationship with their students. She claims that those who do connect create a relationship in which both parties can grow. Noddings said, "I want to suggest that caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and that contemporary schooling can be revitalized in its light" (p. 27). Based on the implicit attention to caring in much of the higher and adult education literature that emphasizes connection and relationship, as well as the research studies that have found that caring on the part of the teacher is a value in higher education, it appears that caring is an important value that needs to be considered in educating adults as well as children.

## Conclusion

The increasing number of adults attending institutions of higher education makes it even more important to learn about adult students' learning preferences. Although the existing learning preferences literature tells us some things about adult students' preferences, it is incomplete in that it does not identify the subjects represented by the studies. Although we know the respondents are adults, the learning preferences literature is silent concerning the positionality of the subjects of the studies. The research concerning the impact of gender, race, class, and culture on students' learning experiences indicates that diverse students have very different experiences in educational environments. Knowledge of the impact of students' differences based on gender, race, class, and culture on their classroom learning experiences could enable adult educators to work to create an educational environment that is beneficial for all students, not just those from the dominant culture.

In addition, most of the learning preferences studies were conducted 10 to 30 years ago, so it would be informative to learn more about today's adults in higher education. Most of the existing learning preferences literature is quantitative; qualitative research could delve more deeply into students' preferences as well as their reasons for those preferences.

This chapter is intended to call to the attention of educators in adult and higher education the importance of determining what classroom learning environment best meets all students' needs. There is a need for research aimed

at determining the classroom learning preferences of diverse adult students in higher education so that educators can structure educational environments in which all students can attain their full potential.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This study was intended to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom. This chapter will focus on the methodology used in the study. First, the purpose of the study and the key research questions will be presented followed by a discussion of the qualitative research paradigm and the rationale for choosing this paradigm as well as the selection of a social constructivist research perspective. This will be followed by a description of participant selection, data collection and analysis methods, and profiles of the participants. Finally, strategies for ensuring trustworthiness of the findings are discussed.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom. This qualitative study extends the existing learning preferences literature by providing depth through interviews of participants, designed to learn of their preferences in their own words. It also uncovered the reasons behind their stated preferences and the meaning of their new learning in light of both individual preferences and the social context of the higher education classroom. In addition, a diverse group of students who have actually experienced a variety of teaching approaches in

the higher education classroom were selected in order to determine how learning preferences differ based on participants' positionality and to learn the meanings diverse students place on their classroom experiences.

This study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the characteristics of the learning environment preferred by adult community college students? (b) What are the underlying reasons for adult community college students' stated preferences? (c) What is the perceived relationship of adult community college students between their individual learning and the social context of the classroom? (d) How do adult community college students' differences based on gender, race, class, and culture affect their stated learning preferences? (e) How do diverse community college students make meaning of their new learning?

### The Qualitative Research Paradigm

The qualitative research paradigm was chosen for this study because qualitative methods are effective in uncovering meanings people attach to their experiences. Merriam and Simpson (1995) point out that qualitative methods are "especially well suited" (p. 97) for applied fields such as adult education, where one purpose of research is to understand people's experiences in order to improve practice. It is for this reason that I selected the qualitative paradigm for this study that sought to understand the meanings adult community college students attach to their learning experiences. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) state that qualitative methods "allow us to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own definitions of the world" (p. 4).



Merriam and Simpson (1995) contend that all types of qualitative research are based on the key philosophical assumption that individuals construct reality as they interact with their social worlds. This viewpoint is consistent with social constructivism, which is the research perspective in this study and which will be discussed further in the next section. As Merriam and Simpson state, "Drawing from phenomenology and symbolic interaction in particular, qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 98).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to qualitative research as naturalistic inquiry and outline its major characteristics as follows: (a) Research is carried out in the *natural settings* of those studied because the phenomena of study "take their meaning as much from their contexts as they do from themselves" (p. 189). Realities cannot be understood apart from their contexts. (b) The researcher is a *human instrument*, who can grasp holistically the experiences and the setting being studied and who can be responsive and flexible, processing data immediately allowing for immediate clarification and summarization resulting in increasing the depth and richness of the outcomes. (c) Qualitative research makes use of a *purposive sampling* of participants who meet specific criteria because it allows a variety of realities to be included and gets at studying the particular in depth. (d) Multiple realities are more likely to be uncovered using *inductive data analysis*, and this process can more readily describe the setting and facilitate decisions about transferability to other settings. Since the purpose of this study was to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of

their educational experiences in the classroom, the qualitative paradigm was especially appropriate. A qualitative research study facilitates study in depth and detail. It allows the researcher to approach the study “without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis, contributing to the depth, openness, and detail of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). In summary, then, qualitative research takes place in the natural setting utilizing the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Data is inductively analyzed in qualitative research and meaning is the primary concern. Qualitative research generates data rich in description and is holistic, process oriented, and dynamic, possessing context sensitivity. Given that qualitative researchers are “interested in understanding how participants make meaning” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6) of their worlds and their experiences, it was an appropriate methodology for this study, which sought to understand the meanings adult community college students give to their classroom experiences.

#### Research Perspective—Social Constructivism

Social constructivism provides the primary lens through which to view this study. Constructivism emphasizes “the active participation of the knower in the structuring processes that characterize knowing” (Mahoney, 1996, p. 129). St. Pierre-Hirtle (1996, p. 91) quotes Shor, who said that “Constructivism is a way of building knowledge about self, school, everyday experience, and society through reflection and meaning making” about individual and social experiences. Humans have the ability to construct reality. In discussing social constructivism, Gergen (1994) notes that “knowledge is lodged within the sphere of social relatedness” (p. 30). He contends that individuals are free to construct for

themselves different realities and that how the learner categorizes the world is based on tradition that is passed down through social interactions, hence, the term social constructivism. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) cite Schwandt, who argues that human beings construct knowledge to make sense of experience and they “continually test and modify these constructs in light of new experiences” (p. 197). Social constructivism was chosen as the primary lens for this study because each learner takes away from a class a somewhat different understanding, shaped by his or her personal interpretive framework, prior knowledge, and motivation, and learners will mutually influence the sense each makes of their common experiences (Clark, 1998) because of the interaction and social context of the classroom. It is this meaning that this study sought to understand.

Patton (2002) cites Guba and Lincoln, who discuss the following primary assumptions of constructivism: They contend that truth is “a matter of consensus among informed and sophisticated constructors, not of correspondence with objective reality” and that facts “have no meaning except within some value framework, hence there cannot be an ‘objective’ assessment of any proposition” (p. 98). In addition, they argue that “phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied” (p. 98). Therefore, findings are not generalizable. Furthermore, Guba and Lincoln indicate that the thread throughout the constructivist perspective is emphasis on the socially constructed nature of reality as distinguishing the study of human beings from the study of other natural phenomena.

Constructivism has contributed to qualitative inquiry by capturing multiple perspectives and drawing attention to the ways language as a social and cultural construction influences understandings, how methods impact findings, and the effect of the relationship between the researcher and the participants, especially the effects of power differences and how that relationship influences findings (Patton, 2002). Schwandt (2000) says the garden variety of constructivism says that “we are all constructivists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge” (p. 197). He argues that humans construct knowledge rather than discover it and that we construct that knowledge not in isolation but amidst shared language and understandings. According to Patton (2002, p. 132), the central questions of the constructivist perspective are: “How have the people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, ‘truths,’ explanations, beliefs, and worldview? What are the consequences of their constructions for their behaviors and for those with whom they interact?” Answers to these questions are the focus of this qualitative study of adult community college students.

In his discussion of constructivism, Schwandt (1998) refers to multiple and changing realities and contends that the sciences, arts, and humanities represent many versions of the world. Based on this assumption, knowledge is not static but constantly evolving as new experiences take place. Even the act of being interviewed changes people’s experience because the interview process facilitates the interviewee’s ability to integrate the experience.

Patton asks, “How, then, does operating from a constructionist perspective actually affect qualitative inquiry?” (Patton, 2002, p. 97). Each participant would

be expected to have different experiences and perceptions, all of which are considered real by the individual. The qualitative researcher should attempt to capture these different perspectives through open-ended, in-depth interviews and not determine one perspective to be more valid than the other.

This study has been conducted from the social constructivist perspective because I am attempting to understand the meanings a diverse group of adult community college students attribute to their classroom learning experiences. It should be noted that how the researcher constructs meaning also affects the outcome of a study; therefore, my own positionality and biases as a professor in the community college for the past 25 years may have affected this research. As a teacher who has a great deal of experience teaching adults utilizing a variety of teaching methodologies, I bring much tacit knowledge about teaching and learning in the community college from the perspective of the teacher. From a social constructivist perspective, teaching and learning in classroom settings builds on the dynamics of relationships between and among teachers, learners, content, and experience. This dynamic is also at play in the practice of research in the relationship between the researcher and the participant as they build on and construct new meaning and knowledge together. For these reasons, a social constructivist perspective has been considered the best one for this study.

### Participant Selection

Participants for this study were selected from a purposeful sample of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds. Patton (2002) asserts that purposeful sampling is perhaps the most distinguishing difference between quantitative and qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methodology

typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, which are the focus of the study. The intention in purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases that will be studied in depth allowing the researcher to learn a great deal about the main issues being studied. The goal of purposeful sampling is to gain insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. Much can be learned from the insights gained from a small, purposeful sample; and the results can lead to further research. A purposeful sample can provide participants who represent individuals whose knowledge and experiences are of interest to the researcher (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002).

Patton (2002) reviews a number of different strategies for selecting information-rich cases. The strategy that was used for participant selection in this study was “maximum variation (heterogeneity)” (pp. 234-5), which is intended to capture and describe central themes that cut across the varied participants. One value of this maximum variation strategy is that common themes that emerge from these varied participants can be particularly interesting and valuable in capturing the shared experiences of the participants. In this study, I was interested in learning what a diverse group of adult community college students prefer in their educational environment as well as what differences in preferences may exist among the diverse members of this heterogeneous group. In order to ensure heterogeneity, adult community college students were selected with a focus on ensuring a diverse representation based on gender, race, class, and culture.

No rules exist concerning sample size in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). The sample size “depends on what you want to find out, why you want to

find it out, how the findings will be used, and what resources (including time) you have for the study” (p. 244). So, sample size in qualitative research should be judged based on the purpose and rationale of the study and should be judged in context. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend using redundancy to determine when to discontinue sampling. They recommend continuing sampling until information saturation occurs, meaning that no new information is being uncovered by interviewing more participants and no new themes are emerging. Although I reached saturation after approximately six interviews, I continued interviewing students because I wanted to learn the preferences of a larger number of students and ensure that a wide variety of voices were heard. Therefore, I interviewed 18 individual participants and 2 focus groups. Each focus group was comprised of 6 participants. One focus group was white participants, and the other focus group was participants of color. The focus groups were set up this way because it was assumed that some people might feel freer to speak about issues related to diversity and cultural responsiveness if they were in a focus group made up of those who might be perceived to have a similar cultural or educational experience as members of either a more dominant culture or a more marginalized cultural group.

Selection of participants was based on the following criteria:

(a) Participants were 25 years of age or older. (b) Participants were selected who are currently or have recently been students at Reading Area Community College. (c) Participants were selected to represent a diversity based on gender, race, class, and culture. (d) Participants had been exposed to a variety of instructional modalities in their community college classes. (e) Participants were

not students in my classes at the time of the interviews nor were they planning to be students in my classes after the interviews occurred. The participants who were ultimately selected met these criteria but were further determined to be individuals who would have something to say about their educational preferences and be articulate in communicating those preferences. This is true of both the participants who were interviewed individually and those who were interviewed in the 2 focus groups. In addition, the participants of color were selected because of their race, ethnicity, or national origin. After the discussion of data collection and analysis, a description of the individual interviewees and the focus group participants will be presented along with a chart summarizing demographic characteristics of the participants.

The site selected for the research was Reading Area Community College (RACC), where I have been employed as a professor for the past 25 years. I chose RACC as the site of this study not only because it was convenient but because it was these students whose preferences I was most interested to learn. I have been teaching RACC students for 25 years and have been continuously questioning what are the best methods and classroom environment to serve this population of students. Therefore, it seemed logical to conduct the study at RACC. Furthermore, as noted in the first chapter, the existing studies on learning preferences of adult students do not indicate the kinds of teaching/learning methodologies to which students have been exposed. I know the kinds of teaching and learning methodologies to which students in my study have been exposed, either in my own classes or those of my colleagues, which has further enhanced my ability to situate the findings of the study in a larger context.



Current students or recent graduates were recruited through personal contacts or recommendations from colleagues or other students. A brief questionnaire was administered to aid in the selection of participants to ensure that they met the above criteria. A copy of the questionnaire is contained in Appendix A. The actual description of the participants will be provided following the data collection and analysis sections.

### Data Collection

Choosing a method of data collection is very important to the success of any research project. In qualitative research, the primary sources of data are interviews, observations, and documents. The primary source of data for this study was the in-depth interview, which Patton (2002) says allows the researcher to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (p. 341). He says that the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to establish a framework within which participants can express their own understandings in their own terms. Thus, interviewing was a particularly appropriate data collection method for this study since its purpose was to learn the participants’ preferences in their own words. Documents served as a secondary source of data for this study. Course syllabi, student papers, and demographic data sheets were useful sources of some data.

#### *In-depth Interviews*

The primary advantage of interviewing as a technique is adaptability; the interviewer can use participants’ responses to alter the interview situation as needed. Leads can be followed up to obtain more information and clarify responses (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). Participants’ responses should shape

subsequent questions. The researcher needs to be able to listen, think, and talk almost at the same time (Babbie, 2004). Interviews can increase the depth of an inquiry because a researcher who establishes good rapport and encourages the participant can access information that participants might not ordinarily reveal.

Patton (2002) outlines three alternative approaches to the interview:

(a) informal conversational interview, which is based on spontaneous generation of questions during the natural flow of a conversation; (b) general interview guide approach, also referred to as a semi-structured interview (Merriam, 1998), which outlines issues that will be explored with each participant; and (c) standardized open-ended interview, which consists of carefully worded questions intended to be asked of each participant in the same sequence using essentially the same words. This study utilized the general interview guide, or semi-structured, approach to interviewing, which ensured that the same basic questions were pursued with each participant. The interview guide outlines topics that were explored; however, the guide allowed the interviewer to probe and ask additional questions that further illuminated aspects of the subject and allowed for follow up questions in light of participants' responses while the interview was being conducted. This approach allowed the interviewer freedom to explore a conversation within a particular subject area and to spontaneously establish a conversational style while maintaining a focus on the predetermined subject. The use of the interview guide (which appears in Appendix B) enabled me to carefully predetermine how to best use the interview time. It facilitated a focus to the interview while allowing individual perspectives of participants to emerge. Keeping in mind that flexibility is important in order to pursue topics that emerge

during participants' responses, these questions were not necessarily asked in a particular order in each interview. As the first few interviews were conducted, necessary revisions to the interview guide were warranted and minor modifications were made.

A primary interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes was conducted with each participant. Participants were provided with a list of the interview questions in advance of the interview so that they could give thought to their responses; time to reflect allowed them to give more thoughtful answers. Participants were instructed that they could elaborate on any questions and could add additional information not covered by the questions. Transcripts were e-mailed to each participant for review and comment. Then, a brief follow-up was conducted, either in person, by telephone, or by e-mail, (a) for clarification and to verify the transcripts, (b) for exploration of any further areas, and (c) for the participants to share thoughts that may have occurred since the primary interview. In addition, whenever I had additional questions as themes emerged during analysis of the transcripts, participants were contacted by telephone or e-mail. Participants were encouraged to telephone or e-mail with any additional comments.

I asked general questions designed to stimulate participants' reflections about their preferred classroom environment and instructional methodology. I listened intently to participants' answers and asked appropriate follow-up questions in order to delve more deeply into their preferences. I did not believe that I could bracket myself out; however, I did not contribute my own ideas in any significant way. My role was mainly to uncover the meanings that these students give to their learning experiences.

All participants except for two had been students in my classes although they were not in my classes at the time of the interviews nor were they planning to be in my classes in the future. Having had the participants as students in my classes could be viewed as a problem by some; however, from a social constructivist perspective, it actually is beneficial. The social constructivist perspective assumes that knowledge is created in a social context. Since these participants' education took place within the same school and department in which I am a teacher, not only did I have the benefit of hearing their responses but I was there in that same context as well. In addition, I believe that students were more forthcoming in their answers since we already had an established relationship. It is important to the success of the study that the researcher establish trust with the participants. The fact that these students knew me as a teacher at RACC and most of them have been students in my classes in the past was a good starting point in establishing that trust. Furthermore, the fact that I have been a part of the social context in which these students' educational experiences have been taking place did help to solidify the trust the participants had in me as a researcher. In addition, I thoroughly explained the purpose of the study and how their participation would be reflected in the findings of the study. I treated them in a respectful manner so that they knew that I placed a great deal of value on their thoughts. I listened attentively to what they had to say. I assured them that what they told me would be confidential and that pseudonyms would be used in the transcripts and in the final analysis of data. In order to prevent detrimental effects of our pre-existing relationship, as stated previously, I chose students who were not in my classes at the time of the interviews nor were they

expected to be in my classes in the future. This was important because I did not want their responses to be influenced by the fact that they anticipated being in my classes. I wanted them to feel as free as possible to speak openly with me concerning their preferences. I impressed on the participants that this study is not about me nor about my classes but about their overall college classroom experiences.

Patton (2002) points out that the raw data of interviews is direct quotations of the interviewees. It is essential to record as fully as possible their perspectives. With permission of the interviewees, the interviews were tape recorded to ensure that the exact words spoken by the participants were available for analysis. In addition to the tape recordings, brief notes were made for various purposes during the interview such as to formulate new questions as the interview unfolded or to record nonverbal cues, comments regarding the setting, and my own observations. These interview notes were minimal so as not to distract the interviewees. The time following the interview is an important time for critical reflection and elaboration on the part of the researcher. I kept a reflexive journal in which I recorded my own reflections immediately following the interview. These reflections included thoughts about how I felt during the interview and comments about the interviewee's participation in the interview. Issues such as body language and tone of voice were recorded in the journal as well. The interview notes and journal entries relevant to each interview were examined along with the transcripts to achieve a fuller understanding of the meanings that emerged from the interviews. After conducting two or three interviews, I consulted with my

dissertation advisor concerning the questions and the responses to determine if the questions were appropriate and if they were eliciting the desired results.

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) recommend conducting research in the participants' natural settings where most of their social interactions occur. The interviews for this study were conducted at Reading Area Community College in Reading, Pennsylvania, the site of the participants' college experiences. The interviews took place during the winter, spring, and summer of 2005.

### *Focus Group Interviews*

Focus group interviews are conducted for the purpose of adding a variety of perspectives and increasing confidence in whatever patterns emerge (Patton, 2002). The premise of a focus group is that ideas will emerge as people discuss ideas with others. A focus group is primarily an interview; however, direct interactions may occur. Group participants have the opportunity to hear one another's responses and make additional comments to what they hear others say in addition to their own original responses. Consensus among participants is not important, nor is disagreement. The purpose of the focus group interview is to gather data in a context where people can consider their own ideas in light of the views of others. The facilitator of the focus group should create an atmosphere that stimulates comfortable discussion among all participants in the group and the facilitator.

Focus group interviews in this study were intended to complement the individual interviews by enhancing data quality and helping to determine whether participants share or do not share views about the topic. Two focus group interviews were conducted in this study—one comprised of white women and

men and one comprised of women and men of color. Data collected in the focus group interviews were analyzed in a similar manner as that of the individual interviews looking for themes and categories. In the focus group comprised of participants of color as well as the individual interviews with participants of color, special attention was paid to issues of cultural relevance of their college classroom experience.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with collection (Merriam, 2002). Immediately following each interview, I critically reflected and elaborated in my reflexive journal on what was said to allow insights to emerge while the data was fresh. I transcribed the tape-recorded interviews myself so that, as Patton (2002) recommends, I became immersed in the data. Beginning with the first interview, I searched for themes or topics within the words of the interviewees. This enabled me to revise my semi-structured questions early on in the data collection process when needed.

“Data interpretation and analysis involve making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said” (Patton, 2002, p. 380). The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method as described by Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Babbie, 2004; Merriam & Simpson, 1995), which involves (a) studying the interview transcripts in order to generate tentative categories and coding data into the various categories; (b) integrating categories and their properties; (c) reducing categories into fewer categories; and (d) writing the researcher’s interpretation of the data. “The

simultaneous collection and analysis of data end when the categories become saturated” (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p. 116), meaning that new data are no longer emerging.

I analyzed transcripts of the interviews by looking for key themes and making notes in the margins to identify these themes. Then, I looked for common threads among the coded themes and integrated them into categories. As this process evolved, some of the initial themes appeared irrelevant and were eliminated, thus reducing the number of categories. In addition, documents such as course syllabi, student papers, and demographic data sheets as well as interview notes, a reflexive journal, a methodology journal, and member-check documentation were also examined to gain additional insight into the data. Finally, I reported the findings that emerged from the categories in words. I continued to analyze as I wrote my findings in order to gain new understandings of the data.

### Profiles of the Participants

The 18 participants who received individual interviews were 12 females and 6 males. These individual participants included 12 White, 2 African-American, 1 Hispanic, 1 Hispanic/Native Hawaiian, 1 African-American/South Pacific Islander, and 1 Caribbean Islander. The white focus group was comprised of 4 women and 2 men. The focus group comprised of people of color included 4 women and 2 men. This group included 1 African, 2 Hispanic, 1 Egyptian, 1 Brazilian, and 1 American of East Indian descent. The mean age of the participants was 43.



The following section includes a description of each of the participants including basic demographic information as well as a brief account of their educational histories in order to provide perspective to the data reported in this chapter. The participants are presented in the order in which they were interviewed. Pseudonyms are used to protect identities and maintain confidentiality.

### *Individual Participants*

*Kay* is a 43-year-old white woman who was born in and attended public schools in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Kay began her college education at RACC at the age of 40 and received an Associate's degree in Business Management in 2005. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree at Alvernia College.

*Gregory* is a 48-year-old man of mixed race, African-American and South Pacific Islander, who was born in Reading. During his youth, Gregory lived in Taiwan, Okinawa, and the United States since his father was in the Air Force. His first four years of elementary school were spent in Okinawa. Then, Gregory attended a Catholic school and a vocational-technical school in Reading after which he joined the U.S. Army and was stationed in Germany. Gregory attended one year of college previous to attending RACC, where he is working on an Associate's degree in Information Technology.

*John*, a 52-year-old white man, was born in Reading and attended schools in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey. After high school, he attended Rider University for two years. In 2003, John graduated from RACC with an Associate's degree in Business Management.

*Ken* is a 47-year-old white man who was born in Reading and attended a number of schools in Pennsylvania and Florida. He attended West Chester University beginning in 1978. In 2005, Ken received an Associate's degree in Business Management from RACC.

*Orlando*, a 33-year-old man, is a native of Puerto Rico and attended elementary and high school there. At the age of 15, he moved to Pennsylvania, where he attended high school and dropped out in the twelfth grade. Fifteen years later he earned a GED followed by an Associate's degree in Business Management from RACC.

*Connie* is a 30-year-old white woman who was born in the United States. During her elementary and high school years, she lived in many areas of Pennsylvania and attended many different public schools. Before attending RACC, she attended two four-year colleges. Connie received an Associate's degree in Business Management from RACC in 2005 and is now pursuing a Bachelor's degree at Alvernia College.

*Janine* is a 41-year-old white woman who was born in Queens, New York. She attended public elementary school and Catholic high school on Long Island. Janine is nearing completion of an Associate's degree in Business Management at RACC.

*Ruth*, a 57-year-old African-American woman, was born in the South and reared in Reading where she attended public schools. She earned a Bachelor's degree at Philadelphia College of Bible before attending RACC, where she earned an Associate's degree in Business Management in 2004.

*Ed* is a 60-year-old white man who was born in and attended school in New Jersey. After graduating from high school, he attended a technology school and a four-year college and served in the military. Ed earned an Associate's degree in General Studies with an emphasis in Business from RACC in 2004.

*Jeff*, a 52-year-old white man, was born in and attended several public schools in the Reading area. Jeff received additional education and training in the U.S. Navy as well as in a corporation where he worked. Jeff's first college experience was at RACC, where he received an Associate's degree in Business Management in 2005. Jeff is now attending Alvernia College where he is studying Business Administration.

*Josephina* is a 28-year-old woman of Puerto Rican/Native Hawaiian descent. Josephina, the daughter of a military family, was born in Texas and attended school up to her junior year in Hawaii. The family then moved to the Bronx, New York, where she graduated high school. Josephina is nearing completion of an Associate's degree in Business Management at RACC.

*Clara*, a 43-year-old white woman, was born in and attended public schools in Reading. Clara received an Associate's degree in General Studies with an emphasis in Accounting from RACC in 2003. She continued her education at Albright College, where she earned credits toward a Bachelor's degree in Accounting.

*Judi* is a 53-year-old white woman who was born in and attended public schools in the Reading area. Judi went to Albright College at the age of 18, dropping out after two years to marry. After rearing her family, Judi enrolled at RACC and received an Associate's degree in Accounting.

*Mellissa* is a 47-year-old white woman who was born in and attended public schools in central Pennsylvania. After graduating from high school, Mellissa attended several different colleges before receiving a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. Ten years later, Mellissa enrolled at RACC and has nearly completed an Associate's degree in Business Management.

*Madison*, a 41-year-old white woman, was born in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and attended public schools in Boyertown. Madison received an Associate's degree in Business Management from RACC in 2004.

*Katie* is a 60-year-old white woman who was born in and grew up in the Reading area. Over a 20-year period, Katie sporadically attended RACC where she received an Associate's degree in Business Management in 2004.

*Nisha* is a 26-year-old woman who was born in and attended school in Trinidad. She moved to Canada in 1999. After marrying, she moved to Berks County, Pennsylvania, where she attended RACC and received an Associate's degree in Information Technology from RACC.

*Glenda* is a 37-year-old African-American woman who grew up in Reading and attended public schools. Glenda became a teen mother in eleventh grade. Because there was no day care available to her at that time, she dropped out of school. Glenda went to prison in 1994 where she received a G.E.D. She is currently majoring in Business Management at RACC and plans to transfer to a four-year college.

#### *White Focus Group Participants*

A focus group comprised of 6 white adults was asked questions similar to those asked of the individual interviewees.

*Leonard*, a 57-year-old man, was born in Pennsylvania and attended parochial schools there as well as a vocational-technical school. Leonard completed an apprenticeship program to become a machinist and was able to transfer those credits to RACC into the Machine Tool Technology program. After losing his job, Leonard took advantage of a government program that allowed him to attend RACC full time; and he earned an Associate's degree in Business Management in 2005.

*Joanne* is a 42-year-old white woman who was born in and attended a combination of parochial and public schools in Pennsylvania. Joanne attended RACC for one term after high school; but because of lack of family support, dropped out. After marrying, rearing a daughter, and dealing with serious problems with both her husband and daughter, Joanne decided that she needed to get an education. She returned to RACC and received an Associate's degree in Business Management in 2003. Currently, Joanne is nearing the completion of a Bachelor's degree program at Alvernia College.

*Rick* is a 44-year-old white male who was born in Sicily. He moved to Reading at an early age and attended school there. Rick received a Bachelor's degree from Penn State before attending RACC where he received an Associate's degree in Information Technology in 2005.

*Debbie* is a 48-year-old white woman who was born in Mineola, New York, and attended parochial schools on Long Island. Debbie is nearing the completion of an Associate's degree in Business Management at RACC.

*Anne*, a 60-year-old white woman, was born in and attended parochial schools in Reading. Although Anne wanted to attend college, coming from a very

large family did not allow her the financial resources to do so. Anne worked, married, reared children, and worked again. Finally, after the company where she was employed closed, Anne took advantage of a government program to attend college. She is nearing completion of an Associate's degree in Business Management.

*Dorothy* is a 47-year-old white woman who was born in Reading and attended public school in the suburbs of Reading. Dorothy previously received an Associate's degree in chemical engineering from Penn State University and earned credits toward a Bachelor's degree at Alvernia College. Dorothy is currently taking classes at RACC to transfer into a Bachelor's degree in accounting at a four-year institution.

#### *Focus Group Comprised of Participants of Color*

A focus group comprised of 6 participants of color was conducted. They were asked many of the same questions that were asked of the individual interviewees and the white focus group. However, this group focused particularly on the questions concerning cultural relevance that were also asked of the individual interviewees of color.

*Abdul* is a 56-year-old African man who grew up and attended school in Liberia. In the early 1990s he found it necessary to escape from his country because of civil war. He settled in Reading and is a student in the Business Management Associate's degree program at RACC.

*Omar*, a 28-year-old Egyptian man, was educated in Egypt where he received a four-year degree in Accounting from Egypt Zagazig University. He is attending RACC to take courses that are required as part of an M.B.A. program at Kutztown University.

*Isabel*, a 26-year-old Hispanic woman from the Dominican Republic, attended elementary and junior high there. She came to the United States at the age of 13 and graduated from a high school in New York City. Isabel first attended a community college in Manhattan, New York, before moving to Reading and attending RACC where she is majoring in Accounting.

*Inez*, a 27-year-old Hispanic woman from the Dominican Republic, attended school there until she was 16 years old at which time she moved to New York City where she graduated from high school. Inez attended college while taking care of her family and working full-time. When her family moved to Reading, Irene enrolled at RACC where she is currently working on an Associate's degree in Accounting as well as working full time in the Continuing Education Department.

*Chitra* is a 25-year-old woman of East Indian descent who was born in the United States. Chitra attended public schools in the United States and is currently pursuing an Associate's degree in Business Administration at RACC.

*Maria*, a 28-year-old Brazilian woman, grew up and attended school in Brazil. She was attending school there to become a flight attendant when she came to Pennsylvania to learn English, which was a requirement for flight attendants. While in Pennsylvania, Maria married and moved to the Reading area, where she attended RACC and earned an Associate's degree in

Information Technology in 2005. Maria is planning to transfer to Alvernia College to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Computer Information Systems Management.

The following page contains a table including the names of participants as well as their gender, age, race/ethnicity, and country of origin.



Participants in the Study

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>
<b>Individual Interviewees</b>				
Kay	F	43	White	United States
Gregory	M	48	African-American/ South Pacific Islander	United States
John	M	52	White	United States
Ken	M	47	White	United States
Orlando	M	33	Hispanic	Puerto Rico
Connie	F	30	White	United States
Janine	F	41	White	United States
Ruth	F	57	African-American	United States
Ed	M	60	White	United States
Jeff	M	52	White	United States
Josephina	F	28	Hispanic/ Native Hawaiian	United States
Clara	F	43	White	United States
Judi	F	53	White	United States
Mellissa	F	47	White	United States
Madison	F	41	White	United States
Katie	F	60	White	United States
Nisha	F	26	Caribbean Islander	Trinidad
Glenda	F	37	African-American	United States
<b>Focus Group Interviewees—White</b>				
Leonard	M	57	White	United States
Joanne	F	42	White	United States
Rick	M	44	White	Sicily
Debbie	F	48	White	United States
Anne	F	60	White	United States
Dorothy	F	47	White	United States
<b>Focus Group Interviewees—People of Color</b>				
Abdul	M	56	African	Africa
Omar	M	28	Egyptian	Egypt
Isabel	F	26	Hispanic	Dominican Republic
Inez	F	27	Hispanic	Dominican Republic
Chitra	F	25	East Indian	United States
Maria	F	28	Brazilian	Brazil

## Trustworthiness

It is important to discuss the trustworthiness of the findings of this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to reality as “a multiple set of mental constructions” (p. 295), and they point out that the qualitative researcher “must show that he or she has represented those multiple constructions adequately” in a manner that is “credible to the constructors” (p. 296) of the multiple realities. They point out that trustworthiness involves persuading the audience that the findings of a study are worth paying attention to and suggest four criteria to assure trustworthiness of qualitative data: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### *Credibility*

Credibility refers to believability of findings. Fundamental to credibility is the idea that findings represent the meanings of the study participants authentically from their points of view. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer techniques to increase credibility of findings and interpretations. Those techniques relevant to this study are (a) triangulation, defined as activities that make it more likely that credible findings will be produced; (b) peer debriefing, which provides an external check of the process; (c) referential adequacy, an activity that makes it possible to check preliminary findings and interpretation against archived data; and (d) member checking, a direct test of findings and interpretations with the participants of the study.

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories. Source triangulation in this study involved interviewing 18 people individually, though data saturation occurred earlier, and the 2 focus groups

made up a total of 12 students. Individual participants were interviewed once in depth, and there were follow-up conversations to clarify points and to allow participants an opportunity for further comment. The focus groups allowed for building on others' responses in a social context. Comparisons were made among the responses of the various participants and between the interviews and the follow-up conversations. In addition, methodological triangulation occurred by supplementing the interviews with documents including course syllabi, student papers, and demographic data sheets. Investigator triangulation occurred by using other individuals to review the coding of data—one was my dissertation advisor and another was a colleague.

Peer debriefing involves using a disinterested peer to play devil's advocate in order to help keep the researcher honest by probing and questioning in order to probe biases, explore meanings, and clarify bases for interpretations. The debriefing served to question interpretations that were emerging in the researcher's mind and also allowed for development and initial testing of the next steps. It also served as an opportunity for catharsis. I used one peer as well as my dissertation advisor to review transcripts and offer opinions on emerging themes. This method allowed me to receive feedback that helped to put my data and findings into perspective.

Referential adequacy involves making electronic recordings of what is being studied so that they can be examined and compared to the interpretations that are being developed from the data. Such recordings serve as a benchmark

against which later interpretations can be checked for accuracy. The audiotapes of the interviews in this study were used for this purpose. The use of direct quotations also contributed to referential adequacy.

Member checks are considered the most important technique for establishing credibility and involve reviewing of interview transcripts by participants to verify information and perhaps expand on the information that was originally given. Member checks provide a record of participants' agreement. In this study, transcripts were sent to the interviewees for review before the follow-up conversations. During the follow-up conversations, participants had the opportunity to correct any errors and to offer additional insights that may have occurred to them since the initial interview. Additionally, the researcher was able to clarify or follow up on previous information or to ask additional questions that had arisen.

### *Transferability*

It is not the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to determine transferability; "it is his or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). Purposeful sampling can enable the qualitative researcher to provide a wide range of information for inclusion in the thick, rich descriptions that make up the findings. I have provided thick description of the participants and their words, the time and context in which the study was conducted, and the findings to allow those interested in applying the results of the research to another context to reach their own conclusions about whether the findings will transfer. A well-documented audit trail consisting of interview notes, a reflexive

journal, a methodology journal, and member-check documentation is provided to assist interested parties in determining whether the results of this study will apply to their own settings.

### *Dependability*

Dependability refers to whether the process of the study is consistent and stable over time and across researchers and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Process is the main issue of dependability concerns since the setting of qualitative research as well as the researcher's focus are in a state of change. Dependability addresses whether the design, methods, and findings make sense to other researchers. Lincoln and Guba point out that if credibility has been established, then dependability can be assumed; thus, the methods for establishing credibility also aid dependability. Dependability can be assured by "overlap methods," which refers to methodological triangulation. I used the methodological triangulation that I mentioned earlier—in-depth interviewing, course syllabi, student papers, and demographic data sheets. In addition, the audit trail mentioned previously will allow another researcher to assess the study and its findings.

### *Confirmability*

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed by other researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability addresses whether the findings are based on the participants' meanings rather than on the opinions of the researcher. From a social constructivist perspective, knowledge construction is considered to be an ongoing process. From this perspective, the fact that I know the participants probably aids confirmability since the participants

and I, as well as other students and teachers, have a history of building knowledge together. For confirmability to exist, other researchers should reach the same conclusions if they follow the process of the original researcher, being able to track how participants built knowledge and the role of the researcher in that process. The confirmability audit can aid in this process. The audit involves keeping all the documents that are part of the process and product of the study and coding them in such a manner that would allow other researchers to assess the adequacy of the process and findings. I have created an audit trail as indicated in the previous section.

### Summary

This is a qualitative research study and is not meant to be generalizable since the findings are based on a small purposeful sample. Nevertheless, the study does provide an in-depth examination of how a diverse group of adult community college students construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the higher education classroom; and teachers and learners in adult higher education classrooms can determine whether or not the study is applicable to their situations.

Learning the instructional preferences of adult higher education students adds to the existing learning preferences literature as well as enables adult educators and administrators to more effectively design programs and instructional activities to meet the needs of this growing group of students.

This chapter reviews the purpose of the study and the key research questions followed by an examination of the qualitative research paradigm and social constructivism as a research perspective. Next, the criteria for participant

selection is discussed followed by a discussion of data collection analysis techniques. Then, profiles of the participants are provided. Finally, the measures intended to ensure trustworthiness of the findings are discussed.

## CHAPTER 4

### PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 individual participants and 2 focus groups, 1 comprised of 6 white participants and 1 comprised of 6 participants of color. All participants were either currently students in the Business Division at Reading Area Community College or they had graduated from one of the Business Division programs within the two years preceding the interviews. Initial interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Transcripts were e-mailed to participants for review and comment. Follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the participants using e-mail and telephone. The transcripts along with the researcher's reflexive journal provided the data on which the findings of the study are based.

This chapter is comprised of the major themes that emerged from a systematic and detailed analysis of the interview data using the constant comparative method. Participants' learning preferences will be discussed and supported by narratives in the participants' own words. Participants' responses are largely presented verbatim. They have not been edited for grammatical correctness. This is particularly apparent since many of the participants are not native English speakers, and even some of those who exhibit a casual conversational style that is unlike that which they might use in a more formal setting. Reporting responses in the participants' own words is intended to add



richness to the findings. The first major section of this chapter addresses the participants' preference for college instructors who care about students' learning success. The second section reports on the respondents' learning from other students in their college classrooms. The third major section contains the thoughts of participants of color on the cultural relevance of their college classroom experience. Finally, this chapter culminates in a discussion of the classroom activities and techniques preferred by the adult students who participated in this study.

The data display on the following page summarizes the major findings of this study.

## Presentation of the Findings

### A Caring Instructor: Creating a Context for Learning

- Caring as Facilitating Student Success

- Caring as an Engaged, Connecting Presence to Students and Content

  - Being Personable

  - Being Available

  - Being Interesting and Enthusiastic

  - Respecting and Understanding Students

- Caring as a Motivation for Learning

### Learning from Other Students in the College Classroom

- Learning from Others' Differing Experiences and Perspectives

- Learning from Students of Differing Ages

- Learning from Cultural, Racial, Ethnic, and Other Forms of Difference

- Learning from Other Students' Academic Expertise

  - Being in Study Groups with Other Students

  - Being Motivated by Other Students

### Cultural Relevance of the Educational Experience

- Expecting to Adapt to American Culture

- Varying Sensitivity to Language Issues

- Experiencing Some Ethnocentricity and Stereotyping

### Preference Related to Classroom Techniques and Activities

- Instructors Who Are Knowledgeable, Able to Explain Content, and Organized

- Short, Interactive Lectures

- Varied Interactive Activities

  - Student Involvement

  - Whole-Class and Small-Group Discussion

  - Collaborative Group Projects

- Experiential Learning

- Highlighting Real-Life Stories and Examples

- Visual Classroom Techniques

## A Caring Instructor: Creating a Context for Learning

The majority of participants in this study spoke of the importance of caring on the part of their college instructors to them. Their preference for instructors who show that they care about students' success in their classrooms emerged as even more important than the specific techniques used. This section describes in the students' own words the meanings they place on caring by an instructor and the effect caring has on them. First, they define caring by their instructors as facilitating student success. Then, participants speak of caring instructors as an engaged, connecting presence to students and content. Finally, they discuss caring as a motivation for learning.

### *Caring as Facilitating Student Success*

Most participants described caring instructors as those who care about students' learning and who will make an effort to facilitate student success in their classes. Glenda, a 37-year-old African-American woman, explained the importance of a caring instructor to her success in college when she said,

It's very important that the teacher care about what they're teaching, not just about their job. And to care, for me, means to like, just being willing to like back these students up. You know, help them to succeed, not just, "This is my job, this is what I have to do, I'm going to get a paycheck, and let's keep it moving." I need somebody that's just going to be like an inspiration, you know, not just here's the book, here's the syllabus, get the work done, you have this much time to do it, you know, jump in there. A teacher that cares takes that risk and gets involved with their students,

you know. It takes a teacher beyond just the board, so that's real important for a teacher to care about which direction their students are going.

Ken, a 47-year-old white man, indicated that a caring instructor is very important to his success in learning as an adult student when he stated,

I think it's very important that an instructor be caring because, you know, for me as a student knows that the instructor is not just up there expounding facts, getting paid for a job. They're actually up there teaching . . . what we need to learn. . . . That's caring to me because they want to make sure that I do understand what they're trying to teach. . . . They want you to succeed in the class, to get good grades, to understand; but they want me to succeed because they know, especially in this stage of being an adult, there's things out there in the real world that I have to take care of. So, I'm coming to school here to learn these things; and if you have a caring instructor, they understand that.

In a similar vein, Mellissa, a 47-year-old white woman, spoke of instructors caring whether students are getting the education they paid for,

I think it's important for them to care that you learn. . . . If you see somebody that really wants to learn, that you [the instructor] want to help them in any way you can. . . . I guess the way I look at it is the teacher chose this profession. . . . That's what you're there for, and you want that person to succeed, so you have to care that they're getting the education that they're paying for.

When asked how important caring is in an instructor, Katie, a 60-year-old white woman, stated, "Well, I think it's really important." Katie indicated that to her caring means,

Caring that your students get what you're giving, not just standing up there saying the same thing that you've said for the last twenty years. . . . Care that you're reaching somebody, that what you're giving is going somewhere. . . . The people that are getting it and liking it and asking for more information, the instructor should care enough to give them that information; or if they don't know it, direct them where they can get it.

Katie discussed two instructors whom she perceived as not caring if she learned; she stated that she "was out of there in a minute." She dropped those courses.

Connie, a 30-year-old white woman, explained that to really care is to be sure students really know the material and have not just memorized it, acknowledging that memorizing is not learning. She views caring instructors as those who welcome students' questions and seem eager to answer them.

When describing his best instructors, Ed, a 60-year-old white man, brought up caring as important and explained what caring means to him, "They care that you're giving all you can give, they care that they're giving all they can give, and they care that you're trying to get it."

Jeff, a 52-year-old white man, named as one of the best characteristics of instructors,

Caring. That is probably one of the best words that I could use to describe a good characteristic of the instructors I've had. . . . instructors that care the most and care whether their students are getting what is being put in

front of them. . . . You didn't rush over the subject material, and it seemed like you cared whether the students were getting what you were putting out. . . . And that's appreciated.

Josephina, a 28-year-old woman of Puerto Rican/Native Hawaiian descent, defined caring when she described instructors who make sure students are engaged in their learning,

Caring to me is when the instructor, like I said, will notice maybe your lack of interest in class or your lack of participation, your homework, you know. And they're willing to try to find out, "Hey, what's wrong? . . . Is everything OK? Is this class a little bit too much for you? Or is it not engaging you the way it should be? . . . What can I do to make it more interesting for you?" . . . Caring to me is somebody who is willing to take the time to find out what's going on on your side of the world.

Josephina said that when the teacher does not seem to care "it makes it so hard for the student to learn because a student learns best when the teacher cares."

Clara, a 43-year-old white woman, also expressed her opinion of a caring instructor when she discussed instructors who try to make sure students are understanding them, "The key to caring . . . . That if you said it one way and somebody still didn't understand it, you would step back and say, 'Well, why don't we put it this way and maybe you will understand it.'"

Judi, a 53-year-old white woman, described a caring instructor who, in her opinion, wanted students to succeed. She said the instructor "really, really

wanted them to succeed. . . . She really and truly wanted them to succeed. She was not there to put stumbling blocks in their road to succeed and you knew that.”

Vanessa, a 57-year-old black woman, discussed students’ ability to know when an instructor cares about students learning versus their pay checks,

A lot of the teachers don’t realize that we’re seeing through them, you know, that we can tell those that are here for, just for the paycheck versus those that are here, you know, to teach us and care about . . . our learning. . . . It’s noticeable; it stands out.

When asked to describe the characteristics of her best college instructors, those who helped her learn, Nisha, a 26-year-old woman who was born in Trinidad, responded,

I think they have to be caring. They have to show interest in their students. You know, when they stand in front of the classroom, they have to show that they really want you to get the best out of this class. They’re not just being paid to stand in front there. They want you to get the best of the experience.

Nisha reflected on teachers that appear to be teaching just for the money and added, “But the teacher that goes that extra mile for you . . . you know . . . they want you to learn.”

Inez, a 27-year-old woman from the Dominican Republic, indicated that to her caring means “for the instructor to make sure that a student get[s] the message. . . . Just making sure that you understand, that the student understands the topic or whatever you’re talking about.”

Gregory, a 48-year-old male of African-American/South Pacific Island descent, described caring in an instructor when he said,

Caring would be making sure that people are absorbing the knowledge correctly, you know. If he sees people struggling, try and identify those, what it is that they don't understand and work on that . . . caring that a student learns. . . . Staying after class, maybe taking a moment or two within the class to help somebody who needs some special attention or may have presented a question that might be on other people's minds, too.

John, a 52-year-old white man, spoke of caring instructors as going "above and beyond the call of duty" to help students who need help. He discussed instructors being willing to help not only the top-notch students but those who are struggling as well, when he said,

Even people who aren't doing well, it's nice to see the instructor showing that sense of caring with them. 'Cause, like I said, maybe a student who appears to be a weak student will ask a question and you say, "Hey I had that question, too." So I can learn by listening to the teacher teach that student. Focus on that particular student. . . . That's a thoroughness that I see in an instructor. Being there for the top-notch students who're right up on everything; also being there for the student who's last in line who needs the most help.

Orlando, a 33-year-old native of Puerto Rico, stated that a caring instructor was especially important to him in classes when he



. . . had difficulties learning, which I needed a little coaching, then I would feel like that's important that the teacher feels . . . like, "Oh, yes, I care about this person learning something." . . . That is important to have, I think, to have a teacher who cares what their students are learning.

Josephina remembered a caring instructor whom she referred to as "the best." She explained that this instructor was willing to put in extra effort to help students. She continued,

It's just the way she teaches, how she gets very close with the student. You know, if they have a problem, she's willing to talk to them about it, willing to take time out of her busy day to meet the student, you know, if they're having a little bit of difficulty. I just like the way she's so compassionate and tries to understand.

Maria, a 28-year-old Brazilian woman, believes that a caring instructor is "sensitive to others' needs, our needs. In case we need help, just call the teacher; and we feel that he wants to help."

These participants described their best college instructors as those who cared about their learning. They emphasized the underlying importance of a caring instructor to their success in college classes. They defined caring as facilitating student success and spoke of teachers who truly care that their students succeed and are willing to put forth an effort to ensure that success. These instructors did not appear to be there just for the paycheck but because they truly wanted to be a part of their students' academic success.

### *Caring as an Engaged, Connecting Presence to Students and Content*

The relationship instructors have with their students is an important consideration for participants in this study. That connecting presence is implicit in the words of Janine, a 41-year-old white mother of three children. When she first enrolled at RACC, she was dealing with a difficult divorce and breast cancer. She described the importance of the caring support she received from faculty in sustaining her through that difficult time,

You know my background, just everything I've gone through since I've been here. Just the support from everybody and the caringness . . . it really touched me and really helped me through at times, and it was very important to me.

Vanessa described how the effort instructors put forth to ensure that students learn helped her to connect with them. She described an instructor who devoted a lot of time to class preparation and materials. Vanessa views this as caring about students and their success in the class and calls it a “stepping stone to connect” with the instructor. She said,

You can tell that [the instructor] put a lot into [her] classes and class material like by the handouts [she] gave us, the outlines [she] gave us, you know. That took time to do, and [she] didn't have to do that. You know, that was just something that [she] thought would benefit the class; and [she] cared enough about us to give that to us. . . . You know, so that's showing . . . consideration for the class, and that stands out. That draws me in to, you know, that's a stepping stone for me to connect with [the instructor].

In numerous ways, students described caring instructors as an engaged, connecting presence—someone who is there for them in various ways when needed. Some described caring teachers as being personable while others described them as available to them when they need academic help. Some described these engaged instructors as being interesting and enthusiastic about teaching, indicating that teaching is more than just a job to caring instructors. Respecting and understanding students and their lives beyond the school is also an indication to some participants that the instructor is engaged with the students.

*Being personable.* Participants expressed a desire for instructors who are personable. Madison, a 41-year-old white woman, described her idea of the ideal teacher as “Smiling, for one thing . . . introducing herself or himself, and you know, sort of setting the stage. . . . Just be real open, be able to communicate, eye contact, that kind of thing.” Rick, a 44-year-old white man, also indicated that he likes teachers to smile. He said, “It says that they’re actually glad to be there.” He added that he wants “to be able to see the human side of the teacher.”

When asked what she would do to create a successful learning experience if she were the teacher, Judi said, “I think the very first thing you need to do when you walk into the classroom is to introduce yourself and make the students . . . see you as a person and feel welcome in your class.” She said that it is important

. . . because if they like you when they first meet you, even if they don’t like some of the things you do later on, but if they like you . . . I don’t mean

it as a popularity thing. I meant that they come in and they feel good about being in your classroom . . . that gives you a lot of leeway then to do different things with the class.

Ken spoke of an instructor he had when he attended West Chester University saying, “He was very personable. . . . He was easy to talk to and learn from. . . . He just brought the course to life because . . . that made it even more effective.” He thinks that “especially as an adult. I think that is more a key to the learning experience in the classroom. They have to make it fun.” Ken explained, I think fun helps them [students] relax a little. That they don’t get too worried about learning all these new concepts or trying to memorize all these facts. If you are more relaxed, I think you are more open-minded to soak in the knowledge.

Josephina, too, referred to relaxing the students. She said that if she were the instructor she would “greet my students warmly. . . . My classroom would be an open classroom.” She indicated that she would be personable and her classroom would be friendly and she would ask the students how they are and how their family is in an effort to relax them. Josephina spoke of a math instructor who “gets very close with the student.” She said, “If they have a problem, she’s willing to talk to them about it, willing to take time out of her busy day to meet the student.”

Both Mellissa and Madison indicated that their best learning experiences were with instructors who were “down to earth.” Mellissa described an instructor “who was real.” Madison explained that such instructors understand that the students do have lives outside the classroom and show a concern for that. She

likes instructors with whom she can “become friendly,” explaining that it is important to her to relate to the instructor and know that the instructor relates to her. Madison went on to talk about how she felt when she had an instructor with an intimidating personality. She said, “The student could be fearful; and fear would stop, I think, the learning.” Madison said when she has a personable instructor with whom she can relate she “can soar.” She said, “I can learn. I don’t feel uneasy about asking questions.”

Nisha said, “The teacher has to make me feel comfortable enough that if I, if I am not understanding something, I can ask a question.” Katie, too, spoke of an instructor who she said was “very, very approachable.” She added, “You could ask him anything and get an explanation. He never, even though I felt he was brilliant about his stuff, he didn’t condescend to anyone.” Katie said,

There was a whole lot of interchange in your classes, too. You’re so tactful; you’re so aware of people’s feelings; and I mean, even if somebody said something really off the wall, you just took it in stride and turned it around that it was not unpleasant for anybody.

Glenda, when asked how she would create a successful learning experience if she were the instructor, said,

I would get to know my students to the best of my ability. . . . I would keep a frame of mind that I’m going to affect their lives and have an open door so that they’re willing to come to me for whatever help they need.

John said that the instructor should have a “personable side that shows through” because he thinks classes should be fun. He looks for “some humor, some humanity.” John believes, “You include more people that way. You do

catch the ones who need that personable sense.” Katie also referred to liking teachers who have a “sense of humor.” She described one of her best instructors as “extremely down to earth, not pompous and high above us, you know.” Katie added, “I could tell that she was interested in her subject.”

*Being available.* Participants described caring instructors as those who are available to students and who show interest in them. When asked what caring by an instructor means to her, Madison explained,

I guess, just be interested, be interested in the student. Be available. . . .

Know that you can call them at home. Encourage them to call you at home if they need to. . . . Just encourage and find out about them.

Vanessa described caring instructors as being available when students visit their offices. She described a particular instructor who she knew was a busy person but who always made time for her when she visited her office. Vanessa described her worst instructors as not really caring if she learned or not, not being willing to take the time to assure that students understood, and not being available after class to help students who needed help.

Josephina commented on the fact that the majority of RACC’s instructors give out their home phone numbers and e-mail addresses and encourage students to ask for help when needed. She stated,

A lot of teachers here I’ve noticed want to see you succeed. They care that you are going [to school], that you’re taking the time to do this. They want to see you succeed. So, they’re going to try their best to make themselves available to you no matter the hour.

For example, Ken stressed the importance of availability of instructors when he stated,

Most all of the teachers, they're always available. That's caring to me, too. . . . It's important to me because I know I always have some avenue where I know that the teacher is for the most part going to be there. If I need special individualized help, I can go to them. And I just don't have to wait till the class or after class or whatever. If need be, I can go to them. So that's very important to me.

When asked to describe the characteristics of the best college teachers she has had, Judi indicated those that care about the student and went on to describe how she can tell right away those that she perceives as caring,

It comes across almost immediately in a classroom. It really does. . . .

When the instructor introduces themselves and tells you what they're expecting out of you, something comes out. I don't know how to explain it. It's there and a very simple thing is [they say], "You call me. If you have any questions, you call me. . . . Here's my home number; this is my office number. I'm in my office from this time to this time; but if you have a question, call me." That impressed me. I went to college 30 years ago; I never had a college professor say that to me.

Isabel, a 26-year-old woman from the Dominican Republic, concurred with Judi's perception that caring instructors will stress their availability by giving out information on how they can be contacted.

Debbie, a 48-year-old white woman, believes that a caring instructor would always have an open door, be available to students. She commented,

I think the caring from the instructor also goes outside the classroom. Like, with you, with you saying if you have a problem, call your home or send you an e-mail. . . . They're available to you outside and inside the room.

*Being interesting and enthusiastic.* Some participants in this study, when they talked about their preference for caring instructors, described them as being interesting and enthusiastic about teaching. They described them as people who really like their jobs and make an effort to do their best for the students. Connie said she sees caring instructors as those that care about teaching. She identified those instructors as liking their jobs, really wanting to teach. She said the best instructors were

. . . the ones that were the most fun, definitely care about the students, and definitely put extra time in. You can tell they care about what they do. They like their job; they like teaching. You know, I think that makes a huge difference.

Dorothy, a 47-year-old white female, when discussing teachers who care, said, "To me, it's important that they care about teaching. Not necessarily about me personally, but they care that they're doing their job, and they're teaching and they're trying to get across to all the students." Dorothy reflected on her previous experience at a four-year university where she received a Bachelor's degree. She felt that the teachers there, except for one in particular, were teaching because they had to teach and they had other things they'd rather be doing such as research. She hasn't had that perception at the community college. Dorothy, when describing what gave her the impression that the teachers at the



community college cared, said, “It’s just their attitude about their teaching. . . . They do get to know the students’ names for one thing. I mean it’s hard to carry on a debate if you don’t know the students’ names and stuff.”

When asked about her best experiences as a student at RACC, Vanessa said that her best experiences involved instructors who appeared to care about their jobs and the students. She said,

Well, I think one of the main things is that I could sense in each one of them [the best instructors] that . . . they acted like they cared, you know, and was concerned about the student. . . . They liked their job. It came across that they liked their job, and you can tell, usually tell, when a person likes their job by what they put into their work.

When asked how he would create a successful learning experience for students if he were the instructor, Jeff said he would try to get the attention of all the students “right off the bat before I even get into any of the heavy subject matter.” He said he would “try to make it interesting enough and . . . invite participation from all the students to get their interest.” He would “include as much animation and interaction as I possibly could with the subject matter to hold that interest level.” Jeff believes that if he gains the attention of the students this way that it “opens it up to your students to share their experiences and becomes a learning experience for the whole class.”

Jeff commented on how the body language and expressiveness of the instructor can help him remember. He said, “When it comes time to test or to remember it, I can get a visual picture of that instructor maybe making a gesture with the hand and that information comes right back. It just pops into my head.”

Josephina expressed a preference for instructors who make the content interesting. She recalled looking forward to attending a management class because she would learn something interesting every day. She explained that getting her interest and keeping it is very important to her learning. Josephina explained this preference by saying, “It’s a lot easier when you take it with like that spoon full of sugar like they say. Because it makes it a lot easier to go down.”

Debbie said, “I do feel that enthusiasm is a big part. . . . so you’d want to go in there with a positive attitude and get everyone involved.” When asked what she would do if she were the teacher to create a successful learning experience for students, Dorothy said, “Show enthusiasm for what I’m teaching.”

Inez spoke of teachers who love to teach saying, “I think there are teachers that they love to teach; therefore, they teach the right way. There are . . . teachers [who] just teach to get paid. And that’s a big difference.” She added, “When the teacher love to teach, love what he or she is doing, then the students get to believe it.”

*Respecting and understanding students.* Other participants in the study referred to caring instructors as those who showed respect and understanding to their students. Kay, a 43-year-old white woman, spoke of caring as “compassion” when she said,

I think it’s being able to read as much as you can each student’s abilities and knowing where they are. Like some of us in the class, you know, don’t need to be able to meet after class to go over something. But to know that you can go to that person [the instructor] and get additional training or just

really say, “My mother’s dead; my mother died. I really need two weeks.”  
And understanding that there is a person behind the student. . . . For the  
teacher to know enough about the student that wants that help that needs  
that, to me, is the compassion that is needed in a college, the non-  
traditional college that we have.

Kay continued by defining compassion,

Involving students, listening, letting them voice whatever it is, you know.  
And not shutting them up. And not making them feel dumb. . . .  
Understanding where your students are, not crushing their views. . . . I  
think compassion means understanding we’re all different. . . . So, that’s  
one side of compassion—understand that people are different and that’s  
OK; and they can learn your stuff without having to learn your views. . . .  
You want to respect who I am and what my beliefs are; and don’t trample  
them, you know. It’s OK for you to believe what you believe; we’re all  
adults here so we have to be treated like that. Don’t think that you can just  
take your classroom and use it to gain whatever it is that you want to gain.  
. . . That’s one main reason I dropped some classes. Definitely, I walked in  
there; and I think I’m not, your views are so apparent that I’m going to shut  
my mind down; and I’m not going to learn anything because every time  
you say something I’m very sensitive to that.

Some students spoke of caring instructors being flexible in order to meet  
the needs of the students. Leonard, a 57-year-old white man, indicated that

caring instructors would give him information if he needed to work ahead because of his schedule. Joanne, a 42-year-old white woman, spoke of the need for flexibility in scheduling. Joanne elaborated,

I think another thing that shows teachers really care is when they're considerate of the students' schedules because especially with the adult students, we have jobs, you know, we have this college schedule, we have family responsibilities. It's really hard to juggle all of that. When teachers take that into consideration when giving assignments and things, I think that really models a considerate attitude towards the students.

Janine stressed that instructors who have respect for her and care about her make a difference. They make her feel like they will miss her if she isn't there. She said, "It matters if I'm there or not." She described it as "another level of connection."

These students spoke of caring instructors as an engaged, connecting presence. They described caring instructors as being personable, as being available to students, as being interesting and enthusiastic, and as respecting and understanding students.

### *Caring as a Motivation for Learning*

Participants explained that a caring instructor plays an important role in motivating them to work harder and be more successful as students. When they perceive that the instructor cares about them and their success, it energizes them to persist and achieve beyond what they may have if the instructor had not

appeared to care. Gregory stated, “So, the caring about me and about everybody else, it helps you learn. It gives you confidence that the instructor is on your side.”

When asked how caring impacted her experience at the college, Janine, the woman who had breast cancer, stated,

It definitely enhanced it; I mean, it enabled me to keep on going and keep coming to school while going through chemo and radiation and everything else. I mean, the kindness and consideration that [the instructors] showed to me really made me able to keep coming and feel like, OK, it matters if I keep going. . . . I mean, if nobody ever said anything, nobody cared, then I probably would have been, well, I’ll do it [attend school] later; but it really helped me get through a time in my life because it [school] was my focus. I didn’t have to focus on cancer and anything else. My focus was school, and that’s what got me through that time.

Josephina indicated the effect the “compassion” showed to her by instructors had on her learning,

It made me feel a lot more at ease. I tried a little bit harder because, with me, when I get frustrated with something the first thing I want to do is just put it on the side. I don’t want to bother with it. . . . The fact that she [her business math instructor] tried to find a way for each student to work through the problem in their best way. It was great. I really appreciated that.

Josephina talked about her struggles with math classes and the teachers whose caring helped her succeed, “So, even though it was a hard thing to go through,

their compassion and their tries to see me succeed helps me to bite the bullet and continue with it.” Josephina, when speaking about teachers that do not seem to care, says,

It’s like, true, you should keep yourself a certain distance from your students; but I like when teacher’s like, you know, “You ought to turn in your homework. Is everything OK with you? Are you understanding the subject matter?” . . . You want to please them. For me, when somebody shows me they care about me, I want to please them.

Josephina described how teachers provide motivation for her,

You have that teacher behind you egging you on like, come on, I know you can do this. I can see it in you. You can do this. The student wants to do it; they’re willing to bite the bullet and just go for it even if it drains them mentally.

Clara, when speaking of how she would respond to a caring teacher in a difficult class, responded,

I would just give it everything I had. You know, to make sure of doing what needs to be done or getting out of it as much as I can. . . . The teacher caring definitely motivates.

A caring instructor is very important to Madison’s learning experience. She explained,

If I have someone who, you know, is caring, who is kind, it just, it causes you just to be put at ease; and it’s like I like this class. You know, I like this professor. . . . I want to do good. It’s a motivator.

Madison, while discussing the characteristics of the best college instructors, explained that they are interested in students. She described interested as someone who shows interest in the person, someone “who’s interested and might ask you a couple questions.” She went on to say that such an instructor is someone who creates a relaxed atmosphere. When asked what that does for her learning, Madison responded,

It makes me comfortable with that teacher. It makes me feel like they are interested and that they’re caring. . . . It, it, completely causes me to soar; I call it soaring. You know, to learn, really great, to want to learn, to be able to learn, to keep it with me, to encourage me, to take me to a higher level. . . . Totally motivated, encouraged, excited about what I’m learning. . . . You know, hope. . . . I’m going to do a good job. It disarms fear; it disarms worry; it disarms anxiety.

Joanne shared her thoughts on how caring instructors motivated her to persist and achieve when she explained,

Caring was important to me as a student. I wanted to feel that, you know, that I belonged, that what I had to say was worthwhile. I needed to know that; I needed that reassurance. I was very insecure when I first started college, and I had a lot of growing up to do emotionally, and I did that here because I did feel cared about. . . . I felt supported. . . . Sometimes I wasn’t really sure if I’d do it. If I’d cut the mustard or not. So, for me, personally, you know, I feel I thrive more in that kind of environment than I do when you just feel like you’re a number and nobody cares. . . . It motivates me to learn and to try and to take risks.

Janine indicated that she is inspired to do a better job for instructors who show they care about her,

Because then I feel more accountable, not only, OK, you're the teacher and I'm a student; but I also feel accountable on a somewhat personal level. Like, you know, here's this person who's really nice and kind to me and I really need to get this done and do a good job.

Chitra, a 25-year-old woman of East Indian descent, highlighted the importance of the relationship with the teacher as a motivator when she said, "If you have a teacher-student relationship, it makes you want to learn. It makes you want to go in. It makes you want to ask questions. You feel comfortable with the teacher." When asked what it means to her and her learning when teachers show that they care, Vanessa responded, "Well, you want to please. You know, you don't want to let someone down that cares for you."

Ed expressed how important a caring instructor is to him as a student. He said, an instructor who did not care could be "devastating." He continued, "It could stop you in your tracks real fast." He indicated that an instructor who cares is "crucial," stating that the instructor caring "keeps you caring. . . . You keep your energy up to continue to do it."

In the same vein, Clara shares an experience that illustrates how having an instructor whom she perceives does not care can have a negative impact on her motivation. She said,

I just felt like he did not care whether we got that subject or not. And we went in there, put our time in, and left. We were not motivated. It was more like just get through the class, ten more weeks. When the teacher cares,



they will always point you in the direction for tutoring or with an extra assignment or extra, you know, a little push here or there. Definitely motivating.

When describing an instructor who she perceived as caring, Judi explained how that motivated her,

It makes me want to do ten times more work. It gets me excited about learning. And it made me want to give 110% instead of 100%. . . . I wanted to do well because I had someone there encouraging me to do well . . . and that was going to help me. It was going to benefit me. . . . Caring in an instructor infuses you with the desire to achieve. I mean it, if there's somebody out there, it's just like cheerleaders on the sidelines for the football team. You hear the cheering, and that gets those guys moving, and you hear the crowd. Having the instructor want you to learn and showing that they really care about you is going to push you.

Mellissa, discussing how she feels when her instructor cares, also noted the motivational effect of a caring instructor. She said,

Oh, I guess it goes back to, you know, the self-esteem we talked about. It's like they really care if I do that; so I guess you're maybe to the point where, you know, you want to put more into it because they care; and if they want to give up an hour of their week to help you, that you want to put into it everything you can to get the most out of it.

In a similar vein, Katie, when asked what effect a caring teacher has on her, responded, “For me, it makes me work harder. It makes me want to do a good job. It makes me, well, anybody, you feel like if somebody cares then it’s meaningful.”

Glenda indicated that when she sees that a teacher cares about her it has a very positive effect, “It makes me want to show up for class, it makes me want to get my work done, it makes me want to look forward to the class and coming back the next day.”

Nisha also believes that caring instructors have a positive impact on her as a student. She said,

It makes my learning experience a little bit better. Because then I’m not afraid to ask questions; I’m not afraid to call the teachers after, you know, for help with something. And I think I, I myself, would put an extra effort into the class if it’s a more difficult class for me. You know, because I know I have that help if I need it. It’s there.

In addition, Orlando described the motivational aspect of a caring instructor when he stated,

I think it’s because if you feel like somebody cares about you, you want to make sure you’re doing the best to please . . . you feel like somebody cares that I want to learn. Let me put the extra effort to do this paper because that person cares whether I do it or not. . . . That’s the way I see it. If I feel like the teacher doesn’t care about you, it doesn’t give you motivation to please anybody. It doesn’t move you.

Debbie expressed the belief that if she knows an instructor cares it motivates her to do better. She wants to please. She said, “The kid comes back out of you, you know. You can’t do bad. It’s a nice teacher. You want to do good.” Rick said that when you have a caring instructor, “It lets you know if you mess up it’s not a fatal error. . . . It takes the pressure off.”

Chitra said that when she feels that the teacher cares, It makes you want to do better. I mean, you want to make the teacher proud. You know the teacher’s working with you. You want to do better yourself because if the teacher’s constantly saying, you know, “You can do this.” Every single day he would say, “Practice, practice, practice” and “Practice makes perfect.” I mean, it just encourages you so much; you just want to push yourself a little more.

Finally, Inez said that the first thing she looks for in a teacher is an attitude of caring. She feels that when the teacher really cares, she, too, is going to care and do the best she can.

These students have made a testament to the power of a caring instructor. They claim that caring instructors motivated them to persevere even when they may otherwise have given up. When instructors show that they care about students and believe in them, students become energized to do their best. In summary, caring instructors are preferred by the participants in this study because they strive to facilitate student success; they are an engaged, connecting presence to students and content; and they provide motivation for students.

## Learning From Other Students in the College Classroom

Participants in this study reported on the impact that the other students in their college classes had on their learning. Some spoke of learning from other students' differing experiences and perspectives. Others claim that they learned from other students' diversity—age, cultural, racial, ethnic, and international as well as socioeconomic and physical ability. Some participants indicated that their academic learning was enhanced by other students through study groups and motivation. In general, they indicated that they gained a greater understanding of others' cultures and perspectives as well as academic benefits.

### *Learning from Others' Differing Experiences and Perspectives*

Participants spoke of learning from other students who were in their college classes, a diversity of students of differing ages, cultures, races, and ethnic groups, for example. Some recalled that they learned when they heard other students speak of their own experiences. Others referred to the value of hearing others' perspectives and viewpoints. Still others said they learned different ways to solve problems or complete tasks.

Kay, a 43-year-old white woman, talked about learning from other students' differing experiences when she said,

I couldn't experience everything, so somebody else would experience a different thing and would be able to relate their experiences, so we were learning from each others' experiences, too.

Jeff, a 52-year-old white man, expressed surprise at the fact that, despite his many years of life experience, he still learned a lot from other students in his classes. He explained,

Believe it or not, I have picked up knowledge from the other students because every time they express their opinions or we discuss something in class I've taken a lot of that . . . . A lot of students at the community college are bringing a lot of life experience with them. As old as I am and what I've been through in my life, I've been picking up things from other students. Sometimes it just shocks you. You think you know everything, and then something pops out of nowhere, and it astounds you.

Gregory, a 48-year-old man of African-American/South Pacific Island descent, also recognized the impact that other students' experiences have had on his learning. He stated, "There are people that have insight of using their experience to add to the class." He said, "I did gain insights from those students."

John, a 52-year-old white man, too, indicated that he has learned from the experiences of his classmates, stating,

The learning experiences here, not only from the classroom teaching, but also listening to all my fellow students . . . . Their different experiences . . . in their business careers in the past or in the present and how that relates to their learning. . . . I am learning [things] that I can apply to things that I learned in the past through my career and also to my future career, too. . . . So learning from the interaction with the classroom, from my classmates.

Connie, a 30-year-old white woman, also speaks of how other students sharing their experiences "makes everything more real. . . . I mean you learn something from a book but then you bring it to a different level and you hear how it was actually."

Jeff reinforced the importance of other students' experiences by reflecting on how he learned by hearing about the experiences shared by his fellow students,

Some of the experience that some of the students have had when we talked about certain things; it's just something you don't think about until we talk about it in class and you think, "Oh, my goodness, how would I react in that situation." These people have done it. It gives you a good basis.

When asked how she learned from other students, Clara, a 43-year-old white woman, commented, "When they asked questions. Because they weren't afraid to ask the questions because I might have been thinking the same thing. . . . And some of their life experiences.

Glenda, a 37-year-old African-American woman, discussed the impact the other students in her classes have had on her learning,

The discussions have been like very important. Because people like voice their opinions and it leaves room for people, sometimes that person over there may say what the other person was afraid to ask and afraid to say, so in turn, it's like an overall information learning. So that's pretty good.

Josephina, a 28-year-old woman of Puerto Rican/Native Hawaiian descent, recognized the importance of other students' viewpoints when she reflected on how she was affected by classroom discussions,

Actually, I do like when the whole class gets into a discussion because you get a chance to see everybody's point of view rather than just the teacher when they lecture. When they open the floor to questions and

comments, it also makes the subject matter a lot more interesting . . . when they . . . allow the other students to speak and, you know, . . . “What did you think of that and how would you deal with that?” You know, it makes it so much more interesting and the subject can be absorbed better because you can hear how another person might have figured that situation out. You know, that kind of works for me, too; I could do it that way.

Josephina also expressed an interest in other students’ ideas when she said, “You also get the other students’ feedback. That I’m big on, when the whole class gets involved.” In addition, she said, “I find it so enjoyable to see what’s on other people’s minds.”

Mellissa, a 47-year-old white woman, referred to enjoying listening to other students’ experiences and viewpoints saying,

I guess I like to listen to the other students, I mean, their experiences. . . . I liked the interaction; I liked learning about other people; I liked hearing their experiences; I liked hearing their thought process, you know, where they’re coming from, what they’re adding to the group. . . . They can bring out different viewpoints maybe that the teacher hasn’t.

When asked how other students’ perspectives have influenced her learning, Vanessa, a 57-year-old African-American woman, commented,

By their experiences and by what they say. . . . I might be thinking this. And someone else says that, you know; and I never quite thought of it that way. . . . If this is true, so, how I feel about the subject will change. You know, you’re open to change.

Orlando, a 33-year-old Puerto Rican man, also reflected on learning other ways to do things from students in his classes,

I remember learning from some . . . . There are so many ways of doing things. That person would give their own way of doing it, whatever the subject was about. That gives you a different view of how it should be handled.

Connie talked about learning different approaches to solving problems in her classes,

They tell you the way they're doing it, and actually there's many ways to do a problem, but I'm doing it this way, and it makes sense. That influences the way you learn because you listen to the way they're taking it, and I think that helps, too.

In addition, Kay also spoke of liking to learn different approaches to solving problems and completing projects from other students, approaches that are different from her own.

These participants spoke of how their own learning was affected by hearing other students speak of their experiences and express their different perspectives. They indicated that what they learned from other students added to what was being taught by the teacher. It provided a richness through the sharing of other students' life experiences and differing perspectives.

#### *Learning From Students of Differing Ages*

Participants spoke of being in classes with students of varying ages and of the role these students played in their learning. This section highlights some of those comments in the students' own words.



Nisha, a 26-year-old woman from Trinidad, remembered older students in her classes and her inclination to gravitate to them although she is a younger student, “. . . mostly adults, they have these experiences; and they would share with you . . . .”

Judi, a 53-year-old white woman, talked about learning the perspectives of younger students. She said,

Everybody has their own perspective; and I think because you're older you tend to start feeling when you're with the younger group, you start feeling they're your kids. I know better than they do. But in a classroom, basically, you're on an equal footing. You're all students. It's you against the instructor. You're in this together; and so even though I may have had more life experiences than these kids, they're experiencing things for the first time right now; and it's so fresh that when you're sitting there trying to, you're working on a project together, their ideas are going to be completely different from yours. And it's very refreshing, and it also reminded me that I, yes, I'm in a classroom, and I'm not too old to learn, but at the same time to really be open to new ideas, not just knowing what it says in your textbook but to be open to new ideas.

Debbie, a 48-year-old white woman, too, spoke of gaining a different perspective from students in her classes. She talked about becoming more open minded when she explained,

Sometimes you agree and sometimes you don't; but it's just funny to see the way somebody young is going to come up with a whole different outlook on the subject. And it gives you different perspective; and you can

be open-minded, then. That's what I like about it. Because of the age difference, you get so much open minded in the whole thing.

Kay spoke of the "tremendous" impact younger students in her classes had in helping her to understand others. She stated,

This kid walked in and he was all hoodlumed out, you know. I just. He sat down next to me; and I thought, "Oh, this kid is going to need help." So I started like giving him pencils; and I said, you know, "We'll study for the test together." Well, it ends up this kid is a genius.

Kay continued by saying that she became friends with this young man and they studied together. She explained that getting to know someone so different from herself "helps you grow as a person." Kay likes "the idea that people are different." She commented,

It's exciting to me, and I like to watch people. I might not want to participate with them, but I think to come here and really see. It's just interesting knowing so many different people. I mean just in one class I could line up who these people are and what they come from and what they do.

She added that going to college "has been a valuable experience. I don't know how to qualify that. . . . It just makes me understand people more." Kay continued by saying,

It has opened my eyes to know that there are really differences within who we are. In this type of setting, we all come from such, such diverse backgrounds. I mean, you have the older people who have been laid off; and you have the 17-year-old who's just starting his life, you know; and

he's coming in and his idea of studying is completely different from your idea of studying; but you two can sit down together and kind of work things out. . . . I think that I've learned a lot, more than knowledge, from being around other people.

John similarly commented how going to college and interacting with different people has given him a better understanding of others,

Ah, they've opened my mind, different ages, different personalities, different appearances. . . . It's a matter of having the same goal, you know, all kinds of different people having the same goal and working toward it. You can accomplish it because you get into study groups with people that, you know, young people with all kinds of piercings, different hair, different dress.

Katie, a 60-year-old white woman, talked about gaining a broader understanding of people from being thrown together with a diverse group of students in her classes. She explained,

There were people that I was in class with and worked with here that, on the street, I might be afraid of, you know. Absolutely not bother to talk to them just because, uh, they are a whole generation away from me or two generations away from me and just not anybody I would run into except here.

Katie continued to talk about these younger students,

I mean, I think I'm pretty open minded; but I just wouldn't, seeing some of these people on the street, I wouldn't have a conversation with them; but I had to. I had to get to know them to do what we had to do here, and it just

reinforced my thinking about people. They're just people, you know, no matter what they look like or how they are. . . . You can't discount anybody by how they look or how old they are.

Debbie spoke of how her own perspectives were altered by interacting with younger students in her classes,

You meet a lot of younger students that you get to talk to. And it's so nice to see the difference in just, I mean, sometimes you agree and sometimes you don't; but it's just funny to see the way somebody young is going to come up with a whole different outlook on the subject. And it gives you different perspective; and you can be open-minded, then. That's what I like about it.

These participants spoke of how their interactions in the classroom with students of differing ages served to enhance their learning and broaden their perspectives. They explained that they gained more than knowledge in their college classes. Interacting with students of differing ages helped them to better appreciate differing views and to be more open-minded.

#### *Learning from Cultural, Racial, Ethnic, and Other Forms of Difference*

Participants spoke of learning from other students in their college classes who represented various types of diversity—cultural, racial, ethnic, international, as well as socioeconomic and physical ability. This section contains those comments in the students' own words.

Since her husband's family is Mexican, Connie is accustomed to a great deal of diversity. She did indicate, however, that in the classroom she recognized the different perspectives a diverse group of students brings. She said, "Different

people bring different things to the class. . . . They look at it a different way; they hear it a different way.” Similarly, John stated, “They helped me in my better understanding of different cultures. They helped me learn through their discussions in class on what we were learning itself [the content] and different views.”

Glenda, seemed to be inspired by seeing a diverse group of students enter her college classes and was awed by the cooperation and atmosphere of helpfulness that she experienced there. She said,

When I see people older than me, that gives me hope. When I see people just come in the door younger than me, I’m like, “Wow, they have a future.” When I see the handicapped people, that gives me more hope that like here they’re willing to do what they have to do; and even like with the people that just come from Africa or have the language stuff or the accents, the heavy accents, just being willing to keep pushing. And here everybody just helps everybody. That’s what I see, that everybody just helps everybody. It’s like an outside family from your home family, and that’s the experience that I’m getting here. . . . Everybody, I mean everybody, helps everybody; and it’s a good thing. It doesn’t matter how old you are, how young you are; it’s like we’re all here for one common goal, so diversity is good.

Glenda explained that this was especially important to her because she had experienced difficulties previously when she was a manager in a restaurant because she had been intolerant of differences. She said,

I wanted to inflict my value system or my beliefs of right and wrong on other people that worked with me. Like the gender differences. We had the people that were like gay; we had the people that were like Mexican, you know; some people still had their racist bias; so we had a little bit of everything at that job. We had people that were still like active addicted people.

Glenda continued by describing a class in which she gained considerable insight into understanding differences,

It helped me to see people's different values, their different morals, their ethics; it was like first hand because it was a mixture of people—old, young, single parents—a little bit of everything in there. And we did some group discussion; and I learned that even though my values are my values, I don't have to inflict those upon other people because people are different. Everybody is different, that we can all work together.

Kay described how "Knowing about different people and understanding their lives . . . has been the biggest learning experience" for her. She explained,

The diversity within our school tremendously has helped us, you know, because I can turn around and talk to a guy who's a hip hop artist, you know . . . and turn around and talk to a mother who's the leader of a church group. You know, we have all aspects of people here, which is just marvelous.

Kay explained that in her life and her work she had always been in homogeneous groups. She believes that getting to know more about other people's lives will help her in her future career in human resources.

John spoke of participating in group activities inside and outside the classroom with a diverse group of people. He claimed that it helped him to be “comfortable among different people, a diverse population, to know that you can communicate with somebody if you need to.” He spoke of how “cool” he thought it was to see a diverse population of students “working toward a common goal. That’s the dream in action, I think.”

Janine, a 41-year-old white woman, expressed interest in the variety of people who were in her college classes and the lesson she took from that interaction saying, “And everybody has such different lives. . . . It’s just amazing to see how many different people there are and different situations there are.” She went on to talk about the “handicapped” students that she saw in her classes. When asked what lesson she took from association with people who were physically disabled, Janine said,

Just have consideration for everybody else and that everybody is a person with feelings and everybody’s here for the point, to develop themselves and get an education; and it doesn’t matter what you look like or what your health is or anything.

When discussing classroom diversity with Vanessa, a Christian woman, she talked about two young men who were in several of her classes. They stood out as different to her because they talked in classes about starting a strip club. Because they were different from Vanessa in a number of ways, they came to her mind when asked about diversity. Vanessa indicated that she “saw a lot of issues that came up that were thought provoking, you know, for me as well as the whites that were there.” She said that the diversity helped create awareness,

“Hey, I never looked at that before. I never thought about that before.”

Interestingly, Vanessa spoke of a diversity of thought that she saw between herself and another black woman in her class with whom she did not agree on racial issues.

Jeff indicated that he gained a better understanding of “other people’s views of things.” He said,

I’ve seen the other side of the coin. Being a white male working in a steel mill where it was basically a white male workforce, I’ve seen other people’s views [in college classes]; and I’m starting to understand a little bit of the problems that the other students [minorities] have with getting employment and promotions.

Jeff also recognized that making friends with a diverse group of people has had an educational impact on him. He said, “I feel a lot more rounded.”

Judi, a middle-aged white woman, reflected on what she learned from students of various ages, races, and religions who were in her classes. She became good friends with a young Muslim woman from Trinidad, Nisha, who is also a participant in this study. She recalled speaking with Nisha about September 11 and learning about Nisha’s family’s experiences surrounding that event. She also spoke of gaining insight by being in classes with a young black man and an Asian man. Judi said, “He talked about his country and stuff. I would have missed all that if I hadn’t come back to school.”

Madison, a 41-year-old white woman, learned from the diversity of the other students in her classes and reflected on how she gained insight into their different life situations and became aware of the advantages in her own life.



Joanne, a 42-year-old white woman, spoke of how the people from different cultures in her classes opened her eyes to different ways of doing things. She said,

Well, it's definitely more interesting, you know, because again you can learn about other cultures, about other people, about other ways of doing things; so you realize that it's just not all about you, you know. There are other people out there; and it really doesn't matter sometimes how we reach a conclusion, you know. It's more or less the fact that we get there. . . . So that's what I think the other cultures can give us.

In addition, Debbie described how she was able to see other viewpoints through her exposure to diverse classmates,

We had somebody from Haiti, I guess, and somebody from Ecuador; and it was just funny 'cause realistically the things that we found unethical they said is not wrong, the bribing and the taking money and all that. And you, as much as you want to say it's wrong, you hear their story, and their side of it; and to them they're not doing it . . . to be unethical. It's just their way of dealing with business. I find that very interesting.

The white focus group was asked whether their learning would have been different if the diversity among their classmates did not exist; the group answered with a resounding "yes." Dorothy, a 47-year-old white woman, indicated that in some classes, such as business classes, the diversity of the students "makes a huge difference."

Leonard, a 57-year-old white man, talked about the fact that he came to college from a trades background and how the viewpoints of the other students in his classes

. . . made me see things in a different perspective. I'm used to seeing, I've been in the trades since I got out of high school; and seeing things from another point of view like that is completely different and opened up a new way of thinking for me.

Josephina, when asked how the diversity of the students in her classes impacted her learning, indicated that she is "usually the minority in the classroom." She described her difference as younger, Hispanic, and a single mother. Josephina indicated that others seem to enjoy the difference she brings into the classroom and she enjoys the difference that they bring. She described this as "a learning experience." She said, "That's what I like about going to a community college because you get to meet so many people."

Orlando, who spent his first 15 years in Puerto Rico before emigrating to the United States, explained that the diversity in his college classes made him feel more comfortable because of "the way I've been brought up" and the great diversity in the Jehovah's Witness congregation of which he has been a member for the past ten years. He explained that he has "never been around where everybody looked the same." When asked if the diversity in the classroom had any impact on his learning, Orlando said, "It makes me feel at ease." He continued by saying,

I was telling you about I think that having the diversity here at RACC makes me probably feel better since I'm Hispanic. If I was to go to a say

all-white or all-black school, I would feel different and maybe it would make me feel like backward. . . . But all the diversity makes me feel like, OK, I'm just human. Here we are all together trying to learn.

Nisha, who is in her twenties, recalled that the diversity she noticed the most was age. However, she continued by speaking about other forms of diversity. She said,

If we were talking about something else and somebody would bring up something from where they were or something happened in this country or that country. I mean, it helped you understand a little bit better. . . . You learned about different cultures, things like you didn't even know.

Clara recalled learning about a different economic system when a fellow student from an Eastern European country was in her class.

These participants reported very enthusiastically the many ways in which they learned by being in classes with students of different cultures, races, international backgrounds, socioeconomic class, and physical abilities. They learned to better understand people who are different from them. Some said this has been "the biggest learning experience."

#### *Learning From Other Students' Academic Expertise*

Participants spoke of the ways in which their learning of course material was enhanced by other students' academic expertise in their college classes. They spoke of participating in study groups with other students and being motivated by other students.

*Being in study groups with other students.* John, Clara, and Anne spoke of how their learning was enhanced by participating in study groups with other

students. For example, John indicated that other students “helped me learn” through study groups in which he helped them and they helped him. Clara discussed how important study groups were to her learning when she remembered, “We were on one of your projects; we were on the phone back and forth. . . . And it would be a light bulb moment when it would be, OK, well how about if we try it this way.”

Anne, a 60-year-old white woman, also reflected on how a study group helped her to learn,

I think Dorothy has been extremely helpful to me. . . . A group of us would meet in the student lounge, especially before a test; and we’d sit and quiz each other on things that were going to be on the test; and we figured out that it was as helpful for the one that was asking the questions as for the one who was doing the answering. Because it would reinforce it for everybody that way. . . . We’d often meet and still do, before a test especially, and just, you know, just throw things out. There were times when I would say something to Dorothy; and she’d say, you know, I got that one right because of our conversation.

Kay explained that “The other people in the class influence you as a support system. You help one another.” She said that having other students to work with outside of class was valuable in terms of her learning. She described a fellow student whom she referred to as a “buddy.” She said, “Last night he called and he had a question” and she answered it. She added that sometimes “without someone to call, I would have struggled all weekend.”

Ed, a 60-year-old white man, discussed a competitive atmosphere among the students in his classes. He indicated that “it was competitive” and that the students “tried to keep up with each other.” He also said, “They were helpful.”

Judi, who often helped other students, indicated how she benefited when she helped them saying,

They would come and ask me questions, and we’d start talking and my having to explain something to them helped me immensely, you know.

That just, again, reinforced my learning but also made me think deeper because I maybe didn’t go all the way into the problem or whatever.

Madison discussed the way another student helped her learn, “So she affected my learning . . . in a positive way, you know. She would help me out, you know. I would call her on the phone with Managerial Accounting, and she’d tell me how to set something up.”

*Being motivated by other students.* Participants in this study credited other students in their college classes with providing them with motivation. Orlando talked about the motivational role played by other students in his college classes when he said,

And it was also encouraging to see that like if I would be in the classroom and somebody had a very bad accent that couldn’t communicate right or pronounce the words right and that person still made the effort to give a comment, I thought, “Wow, you know, even though they know they have a bad accent, they’re still going to participate in the class.” That gives you encouragement.

Clara described the motivational effect of the other students in study groups when she said,

But they influenced you to keep going, you know; and instead of getting discouraged . . . you always had a phone at the other end . . . . Then, it would be, come on; you can do this. Keep going . . . . We had a good support system going here.

Judi also reported a positive motivational effect of the other students in her classes. She stated, "If I didn't have them, I probably wouldn't have graduated." She stressed the importance of other students in bringing up questions that needed to be asked. She indicated that she learned "because of the questions and realizing that I don't always get things when I think I do and hearing them ask the questions."

Katie described a motivational impact, when speaking of the other students in her classes,

Well, some were inspiring, especially here at RACC, all the young single mothers that have children, a job, and came to RACC and got good grades. I just am astounded and very impressed about that. . . . I was really inspired by those people.

Katie continued by speaking about a particular female student that impacted her in a positive way, "I just liked her a lot; and she just helped me, helped me to do better." Katie indicated that these people she described as inspirational helped to motivate her as a student.

When asked how her classroom learning experience was influenced by other students, Joanne, a 42-year-old white woman, indicated,

Well, for me it was influenced because it helped me stay motivated to want to be a better student 'cause I was fortunate to get around . . . students that were pretty . . . sharp. And, you know, it caused me to not be a loafer and to slack off with my work 'cause I wanted to be right up there with them every time, you know, so it kind of helped me to be a better student. . . . and it wasn't like it was a competition like it was junior high school or something . . . but again, it was just, you wanted to like impress. . . . You wanted to be the one that had the answer when most of them didn't, you know. That helped me.

Participants painted a picture of other students helping them academically both through interactions in study groups and through motivation that resulted from their contacts with other students. They spoke of how their academic success was enhanced by helping other students and being helped by others. They clearly see a motivational impact from their relations with other students.

#### Cultural Relevance of the Educational Experience

Participants of color, both domestic minorities and international students, were asked a series of questions designed to delve into their perceptions about the cultural relevance of their college classroom experiences. Some of those interviewed indicated that they expected to adapt to American culture and did not expect their classes to relate to their personal culture but rather that they were in college to learn specific information and that they expected it to be presented in a certain way since they were in the United States. Some of the participants spoke of varying degrees of sensitivity to language issues. Others reflected on experiencing some ethnocentricity and stereotyping in their college classrooms.

### *Expecting to Adapt to American Culture*

Some of the participants indicated that they did not expect their college classroom to be particularly relevant to their racial or ethnic culture. Rather, they expect college classes in the United States to reflect American culture. They spoke of their desire to fit into American culture since that is where they will be working.

Nisha, a 26-year-old woman from Trinidad, who is a Muslim, said that some of the material taught was different from what she had experienced in her own country; however, her attitude about this was apparent when she said, "I expect coming into this culture there are certain things that you're going to have to adapt to regardless of how you did it. I'm from Trinidad, you know; we would have done things differently." Nisha continued by saying,

You expected to be taught in the way of this culture. . . . Because I'm in American society, I will be working in an American environment. Even though the population is diverse, you're still going to have 60 percent of the people, you know, being Americans; and they may not discriminate; but this is just the expectation. . . . If I were to go to India or to China, then, I would have to adapt to their culture; but I am in American society, so that is what I have to expect.

Josephina, a 28-year-old woman of Puerto Rican/Native Hawaiian descent, has lived in various parts of the world as the daughter of an Army man. When asked questions concerning the cultural relevance of her college education, which has been entirely at RACC so far, she indicated that she did not feel a lack of cultural relevance here. She said,



Actually, no, especially here. Maybe that's why I know I'm going to miss RACC once I leave and continue on because RACC is so culturally diverse. . . . I've managed to have teachers from almost every cultural background possible. I've had Caucasians, I've had black, I've had white, I've had Hispanics, and I don't know, I really think it's . . . . I have to say I've enjoyed [it]. Now, I wonder if it's going to be the same once I move to Albright. Will I feel that way?

When asked about her perceptions about the material being taught, Josephina stated,

I have to admit, yes, sometimes it doesn't exactly fit into my world and what I deal with on an everyday basis; but I do realize that I cannot stay in just my world. I have to spread my wings and learn about others and know what's actually out there for me. . . . Changes come at you on a daily basis in many shapes and forms. So, I take it more as a learning experience . . . and try to take from it what I need to know as backup for when I do get out there.

Josephina referred to what her teachers have to share with her as a learning experience. She said,

Especially, I've learned that a lot, when my teachers sit and tell us, "OK, in my experience, this is how the workforce is and this is what you may have to deal with," I perk up and listen really well. Because I'm like, OK, this is good because this is somebody who has been out there already who knows what the players are like and the movers and shakers and I want to

learn what that person knows. That way when I go out, I'm backed up with information so that I know how to deal with it because if I just stay where I've been raised and the mindset . . . that's a downfall.

She continued by saying,

It actually motivates me more because I know what I want to get into and I know what I want to deal with so . . . I try to, like I said, so when they're speaking and they're letting us know, "OK, this is how it is out there," I take note of it and file it away for later.

When asked if she thought that her culture was being left out, Glenda, a 37-year-old African-American woman, stated, "No. Not at all." Glenda went on to explain that she sees diversity throughout her textbooks.

Chitra, who is of East Indian descent but was born and reared in the United States, expressed her opinion saying that she didn't expect business classes to be culturally relevant like you might expect in some other subjects.

She explained,

I think the only classes that really get into different cultures and their meanings and stuff are humanities classes. It's hard for business classes, I don't know, science classes and stuff to get into that. So, you don't have the opportunity to talk about diversity or different cultures. And, as far as humanities classes, I think it's easier, like, it just makes it easier to talk about it. . . . That's what the class is, you know, that's what you're going to talk about.

When asked if they felt that their cultures were left out of the classroom and textbooks, Inez, a 27-year old woman from the Dominican Republic, and

Maria, a 28-year-old Brazilian woman, both said, “Not really.” Chitra agreed, “Because when you’re in school, you’re there for that subject. And you want to learn about that subject.” Maria added, “You’re not worried about culture.” Chitra continued, “You’re dealing with the issues at work. You’re not really dealing with your background and that kind of stuff. I don’t really think about it.”

Most of these participants expressed the opinion that in their career-oriented classes they do not see that culture is an issue. Maria said, “I mean, when you’re talking about sociology, we can go into it, culture, you know; we can talk about culture; but in most of the classes . . . it’s not about culture when you’re in school. You’re here just to learn.” These participants indicated that they expect to adapt to American culture since that is the context that they will need to fit into when they graduate and go into the workplace.

#### *Varying Sensitivity to Language Issues*

Of those interviewed, seven were not native English speakers. Participants reported varying sensitivity to language issues. They spoke of issues surrounding their ability to speak and understand English in their college classes, especially when they first came to the United States, and varying levels of sensitivity to language issues among teachers.

Maria spoke of difficulties when she did not yet speak English very well. She recalled an instructor who frequently referred to examples such as product names and company names and her confusion about what he was saying. She said,

I didn’t enjoy the book; and I really didn’t enjoy the class the way that it was because he would talk just about things here in the United States,

that just someone who lived here in the United States would know the answer. If you tell me about, what is that, Aquafina, [pointing to a bottle of water] if you tell me that and I never saw this bottle before, I wouldn't know what you're talking about. Aquafina could be the name of a person, could be a name of, I don't know, what is Aquafina? So, it didn't make any sense for me because everything in that class was related to United States. . . . And so he didn't make any sense. He would talk about something that I would think that maybe it was some word in English that I didn't know. . . . Or maybe it was about somebody, I didn't know what was going on. I was completely lost in that class, and I explained to him that, and I was just speaking English six months ago.

Maria also explained that this instructor would refer to names of businesses and she had no idea to what he was referring. She explained that he was discussing an

. . . industry that closed down. I didn't know. Until I find out what was going on, was the end of the class already; and I would ask somebody what he's talking about; and she would explain, "Oh, was a business that closed down." When we started the business class, he asked me what is London Fog; and I didn't know; and everybody laugh at me.

Maria explained that she spoke to the instructor explaining to him that she didn't understand these examples. She said,

And he talked to me a couple times outside of class, and I told him English is not my primary language. . . . I just start here; this is my first year. I

speak English; I just start to speak the language. And so he never was sensitive to that. He would understand, but he wouldn't change.

Maria described another class in which she had a negative encounter concerning language. She said,

The only time I feel bad is sometime when I am trying to ask something, and in the beginning my accent was really horrible, and someone would make jokes about, or the teacher would ignore my question, or some teachers would pretend that they understand me, and they didn't, and they wouldn't answer the question that well. Some people do that; they just do that, just because they don't know what the student's saying.

Maria described what was perhaps one of her most negative experiences in college. She explained,

One of my business classes my language was very terrible; and I would ask something maybe twice, three times until the teacher get what I was asking her. And the next day she called me in her office and she asked me to stop asking [questions]. . . . She did that to me and the other one who was from another country as well and another lady she had trouble learning, she did that to her as well. There was three of us. Because we were disturbing the class. . . . In that class, I never spoke in that class. I never spoke. . . . It was terrible for her to ask me to stop asking questions.

Inez, another participant, referred back to one of her high school experiences, which she found

. . . very frustrating because I remember when I came here first, I came in January; and I started school that following month. I didn't know anything

about English, and I was in high school in the tenth grade. The teacher explain[ed] everything on the board, you know math, I knew everything.

She would ask [a question]; I knew what to say, but not in English.

Maria also encountered a teacher who did not at first understand that Maria did know how to do the math because she used a method she learned in Brazil.

Maria explained,

I mean, she didn't explain very well; and I wouldn't get what she was talking. Do you know why? Because I learned math in my country. And math for you guys, division is upside down. I don't have to learn that. I know the way. . . . And I get the same answer, and she wants me to learn the way that it was. . . . And I said, "I got the same answer as you guys"; and she said, "Oh, OK, all right, all right." One day she made me to stay in school because she taught something upside down, and I said I don't know how to do that. And I told her to let me do by myself at home; and I give the answer to you the next day; and she said, "No, you didn't finish. You're going to stay here." She made me stay in class. Everybody went home, and I stay in class with her, and she said, "Now you explain to me how you do it . . . and I got the same answer she did, and she say, "How did you do that?" When asked if the instructor allowed her to use her method, Maria said, "Yes, because she couldn't do it. She couldn't do it the way that I learned, so she didn't have another choice. . . . She had to accept that.

Inez commented on her own accent and explained how the language challenge actually caused her to try harder. She explained,

I have a heavy accent when I speak or when I read, but that doesn't stop for me to talk. What I do, I speak more. And I don't think if anyone were to laugh I just try to do better than that person. I think that's encouragement.

These participants spoke of varying sensitivity to language issues. They discussed issues that arose in their college classroom experiences because of their difficulty with the English language and the impact this had on their learning experiences.

### *Experiencing Some Ethnocentricity and Stereotyping*

Despite the fact that overall the participants of color felt positively about their experiences, they did at times experience some forms of ethnocentricity and/or stereotyping among teachers and students. Vanessa, a 57-year-old African-American woman, spoke of occasions when she would bring up culturally diverse issues in her classes and felt that those discussions were avoided,

On several occasions, I would try to introduce cultural diversity, and the response would be negative. For example, I would see white, actually grown faces, flush and frown. The one which humors me the most is an air of complete silence. . . . There were several occasions during my tenure at RACC that I had to enlighten the teacher or class about cultural issues.

On some occasions, I would address matters in such a way that the teacher would pick up on what I was trying to get across and would fill in the gap. Other times, I had to address issues by informing the teacher of such and such a thing.

Some of the participants spoke of the ethnocentricity and stereotyping that they have witnessed in U.S. schools. Maria stated,

One thing I would like to add is I notice here in the United States that you guys don't teach too much others' cultures. You guys don't talk about other cultures. And when I'm watching television, I don't see news about other countries. And that's really terrible because people think, Americans think, I'm sorry, you're American; but most of them think that Americans are the best.

Maria questioned why we don't learn more about other countries in our schools. She indicated that when she was in school in Brazil she learned about other countries' economic systems; and she finds it hard to understand why Americans don't know more about Brazil, which she describes as the fifth largest country in the world.

Chitra, who grew up in the United States but is of East Indian descent, agreed with this assessment by saying,

Not even me like from being brought up here and going to high school here, I don't remember ever, ever having a class that talked about different cultures until I was in about tenth grade and that was World Cultures. I mean, in history it was U.S. History, World War I, or World War II; it wasn't until tenth grade where we actually, you know, the Chinese culture, the Indian culture, talk about their food, talk about their language, talk about how they think. . . . I actually think since we don't learn a lot about diversity and about the different cultures from elementary school . . . when we're in high school and learn about it, people make fun of each



other. “Oh, we know about this; you eat snakes” or just little childish stuff which causes people to be racist and not understand other cultures because you were not brought up with it.

Inez, too, brought up the subject of stereotypes and recalled a teacher in one of her college classes that described her [Inez’s] culture in a stereotypical way. Inez said that she did attempt to correct this misconception.

Although the participants of color reported a rather inclusive atmosphere in their college classes, these examples help to illustrate some ethnocentricity and stereotyping that they experienced.

This section has addressed the participants’ perceptions of the cultural relevance of their college classroom experience. Most of these students indicated that they did not expect the environment in their college classes to be particularly relevant to their culture since most of the classes are intended to prepare them for the American workplace. Some of the participants spoke of issues that arose in their college classes centered around language. Still others commented on some ethnocentricity and stereotyping present in their college classrooms.

#### Preference Related to Classroom Techniques and Activities

Since this study explored the learning preferences of a diverse group of adult college students, one primary concern of the study was to find out their desire for teaching techniques and activities that they believe enhance their learning. The previous section sets the context of their educational experience. This section contains the participants’ learning preferences in their own words. First, stated preferences for instructors who are knowledgeable, able to explain

content, and organized is addressed. Then, their preference for short, interactive lectures is explored. The third section shows a very strong preference for varied interactive activities. The next section describes a preference for hands-on/experiential learning activities followed by a section stressing the students' preferences for learning from real-life stories and examples. Finally, students express a liking for visual classroom techniques.

*Instructors Who Are Knowledgeable, Able to Explain Content, and Organized*

Participants in this study expressed a desire for a number of different techniques and classroom activities, but foundational to these was a need for their instructors to be knowledgeable about the subject and able to explain it in a way that students can comprehend. In addition, participants want instructors to run an organized classroom. These adult students want the instructor to have a plan and to share the goals of the class with the students. Then, they want the instructor to see that the plan is carried out in a meaningful way.

Some of the participants in this study indicated that they prefer instructors who know how to make students understand the content and who will take the time to do whatever they can to ensure student comprehension. Janine, a 41-year-old white woman, referred to a preference for instructors who have “a really good understanding of the material they’re teaching and the way they presented it was in a way that anybody could understand what they were saying.”

Josephina, a 28-year-old woman of Puerto Rican/Native Hawaiian descent, said, “When you make it more understandable, it’s a lot more enjoyable for the student to learn the subject.”

Jeff, a 52-year-old white man, when asked what teachers do that helps him learn, said, “I would say explaining information is one of the major ones, and I have had a few teachers” that “left just a little bit too much to the student that I considered them like a self-taught class.” Jeff praised an accounting teacher who explained material in a way that it seemed that he was learning “by osmosis.” He said, “Just for some reason it sunk into my head and I really enjoyed it.” He explained that this instructor took the time to ensure that the students understood the material before moving on.

Similarly, Josephina expressed a preference for teachers that take the time to make sure students understand. She said,

I do like it when the teachers make it a little bit more, you know, personal and help you to understand and are willing to go over it again and again until it sticks . . . because there’s nothing worse than a teacher that will explain it and, well, did you get it, or you didn’t get it, well, then, hey, just read the chapter.”

She added, “I like it when they try to help you.”

Maria, a 28-year-old woman from Brazil, spoke of an accounting teacher whose teaching she liked. She said, “She knew how to explain very well.” She further explained that this instructor knew what some of the pitfalls to learning the material were and shared them with the students to accelerate their learning. Maria cited another instructor who used the homework to make the content clearer. She said, “I like him. He’s a great teacher because he goes over the homework; he explains.” Maria painted a vivid description of a teacher who goes out of the way to be sure that students learn when she said,

I like the teacher that comes to class and, you know, doesn't mind to teach. They come to class, and they want to go over the homework. They want to give special attention to someone who might sometimes need it. She talked about the instructor paying special attention to students who need it in order to grasp the material. She continued,

I like a teacher that . . . did really know how to teach because as I told you they go over the homework and they open the book and they make you look for things in the book, they make questions, they make you think.

Maria concluded, "To teach is not too hard. It's just, do your job."

Joanne, a 42-year-old white woman, appreciated teachers who helped her learn on a higher level referring to teachers that "help you . . . really think more abstractly about things . . . to understand the hidden meanings or to understand concepts and then how that can relate to you personally." She continued, "I'm a thinker so I really like to be challenged mentally, to look beyond the basic and just try to see how the whole fits together."

Many students who expressed a need for instructors who can explain content to them expressed a dislike for distance learning courses. Chitra, a 25-year-old woman of East Indian descent, explained that she started a sociology telecourse and decided to drop it because "even if I watch the video, I don't know how much I'm going to understand 'cause it's so broad and there's so much." She said, "But then when you're in class, the teacher narrows it down" and explains it. Maria added, "A light comes on when the teacher comes in the

classroom and he explains.” Inez, a 27-year-old woman from the Dominican Republic, concurred when she said, “I like to see the teacher.” She said she learns through the teacher talking and giving examples.

Glenda, a 37-year-old African-American woman, when describing her best learning experiences said, “You took that risk and made sure that we understood what was going on and what the intent was before you moved to the next thing.” Similarly, Josephina spoke of a math teacher who really helped her learn. She said, “She’s willing to sit down, talk to you, and explain the subject matter; and if you don’t understand it, she’ll go out of her way to make it understandable for you.” Josephina said, “Having her class and having her explain it the way she did made it a whole lot easier.” She explained that this math instructor went beyond teaching formulas and put the problems into the context of everyday situations, which made it a lot easier “to grasp what the problem was asking.”

Dorothy, a 47-year-old white woman, spoke enthusiastically of a chemistry teacher who helped her like the subject so much that she went on to major in chemical engineering. She said,

He was the best teacher I ever had. He would come in, and he would look at just the topic in the chapter, and he would just discuss it and make up examples and stuff. So, you always had the book to look at their examples, and then you had your notes and his way of describing it and his examples. . . . That always helped me a lot.”

She went on to say,

He was giving another perspective, another way of explaining it and dealing with it and letting it sink in; so if you read the book and it didn't sink in or if it's not the way your brain was working or whatever, he'd give you another way.

She described another chemistry class as "the most horrible class I ever had."

She said that instructor just "regurgitated the book word for word."

Katie, a 60-year-old white woman, said that one of her favorite instructors stood out because of

. . . how hard he worked at getting me to understand that complicated stuff. Me and everybody else. He really worked hard. He didn't just like throw it out there and maybe go over it once. If you needed more, he gave you more.

Nisha, a 26-year-old woman from Trinidad, referred to instructors who didn't spend much time answering students' questions. She said, "Another teacher might go into a very lengthy detail to answer a question for you, and you know that that teacher really wanted you to get it." Students tend to prefer instructors who, in Glenda's words, "did what they had to do in order for us to learn the material." When explaining what helps her learn, Inez said, "The teacher talking, not just talking but explaining stuff and giving us examples. I think I learn better that way." She indicated that she doesn't learn as well when she just reads the material. Glenda spoke of the limited time adult students have to devote to studying and stressed how valuable it is when teachers really explain content so that students can understand it.

When asked to describe her best experiences in the classroom, Katie said of the teachers, "First of all, they were really organized; and they planned everything; and they knew what they were talking about. They knew their subject, and they knew how to relate to me and everybody else." Katie indicated that she had these preferences for knowledgeable and organized teachers because "Well, it gained my respect right off the bat." Katie continued to describe her best learning experiences,

I knew up front exactly what was expected. We got the syllabus, we got all those chapter outlines, we got those case studies. And that was really helpful to me to be able to see what was expected of me and what I had to do and how I had to do it. Uh, I like to know . . . what's expected of me.

Katie explained what she would do if she were the teacher saying she

. . . would be prepared and . . . would let people know what is going to happen, what's expected, what we're going to do, how we're going to do it, and be open to questions that people ask me, and have the answers or find answers.

Kay, a 43-year-old white woman, spoke of a preference for organized classes saying,

It's got to be structured. There has to be someone up there telling us how the class is supposed to be. Involve us, but don't let us take it over. . . . I still want my teacher, my professor to be the driving force . . . . I need somebody that I know really knows it. . . . I still want the teacher to teach me . . . . I have to know what your goals are.

Even though Kay does like interactive activities, fundamentally she wants a classroom where the teacher is “up there structured telling you what needs to go on, but let us talk and at times interact.”

Janine expressed a preference for instructors who have a “strong knowledge” of the content as well as a classroom that is structured. She indicated that when she is in a classroom where the instructor is scattered and not really focused that it is difficult for her to learn. She said, “If someone’s very organized and things are laid out and they’re very thorough, then I do much better.” Janine went on to speak of an instructor whom she really liked saying “I think . . . the teaching style was very organized and everything was laid out and very clear cut.” She continued by saying, “I’m like that when I have to learn.” Janine spoke of a math teacher whose teaching style facilitated her learning. She said that “she would just break it all down and it was just so easy.” She continued, “She’d go through each step of the process of figuring out a problem; and if you had any trouble with any part of it, she would go over it until you got it.” Janine found the same to be true of an accounting teacher who she said “explains it in a way that you can understand.” She said the teacher was “very organized, very clear. Everything’s step by step by step.” Janine said she prefers “clear, precise, and just well organized and well presented.” She contrasted this with a teacher who made learning difficult for her saying, “It just was too confusing and so fast.”

Rick, a 44-year-old white man, also expressed a preference for “classes where the teacher was well organized. . . . We knew exactly what they expected of us and when assignments were due.” He said this was important to him



because “there’s a lot of people [students] that are in this, and they don’t have a whole lot of extra time.” Frank explained that “Classes I did the worst in were the ones where the teacher wasn’t organized, and it kind of threw me off.”

Vanessa, a 57-year-old African-American woman, also needs an organized teacher in order for her to be successful. She said the teacher “must be organized and have an easy-to-follow flow.” She continued, “Teachers must stay on track, or I will lose track.” She said that when teachers go out on tangents, “I’m lost. I have a hard time coming back.” Joanne spoke of classes that were disorganized. She said, “Some of those were absolutely ridiculous when nothing was accomplished, no organization.”

Maria shared her experience with a disorganized instructor saying, “None of the homework that he assigned to us he knew the answer. The book that came along that he was using didn’t have the answer. He didn’t know what he had assigned to us. He didn’t know how long it would take to, for you to finish that [the homework]. He didn’t know. That was, I was so upset with the class. I would like to drop [the course], you know.”

In summary, these participants are clearly calling for instructors who are not only knowledgeable but also who can explain the material in a way that facilitates students’ learning. In addition, although they enjoy interactive learning activities, they want instructors who are organized and in control of their classes. Students attribute these characteristics to a classroom where they can effectively learn.

### *Short, Interactive Lectures*

Participants in this study recognized the value of lecture as an instructional technique if it is used in small doses at the right time. They especially were receptive to lecture if the instructor was dynamic, knowledgeable, and interesting.

Ken, a 47-year-old white man, spoke of an instructor whose lectures he enjoyed because they were “full of energy.” He described this instructor as having a “very dynamic teaching style.” Ken said, “I don’t like boring lectures.” It was important to Ken that this instructor’s lectures were bringing into the class “his knowledge that he has of the subject and also all of his personal knowledge that he brought in at the appropriate time.” Ken continued by saying he likes “thought-provoking” lectures because he can remember the information “better if it is thought provoking.” Ken said, “Lectures are OK, but they can’t dominate.” Ken further indicated that if the class is focused too much on the instructor “it stymies individual thought and individual discussion on the part of the students.” Ken did indicate that his ideal class would involve “more discussion than lecture.”

Janine spoke of her experience with an instructor who is very knowledgeable but who tends to lecture a majority of the time. She said, “Sometimes he gets going and I’m like, oh.” She spoke of having a two-hour class with him saying, “Oh, my God, by three o’clock (whistles). You know, I couldn’t understand a word he was saying anymore.” Janine prefers instructors who speak with the students in a more “conversational” manner. She described one of her best instructors as one who was knowledgeable and who shared that knowledge in a “relaxed” way “adding in anecdotes” of real-life experiences and

examples. She said that instructor had a thorough understanding of the subject and shared it in a relaxed manner. Janine said, "That relaxes me so I can learn and take in the information." She added, "I have such a better retention" in that kind of class environment.

Judi, a 53-year-old white woman, recognized the role played by lecture in a class saying, "Lecture is important because that is where you really hear a lot of what the instructor is trying to get across to you. That's their moment, and they can get everything out that they're trying to get out." She said, however,

Unless the instructor is a dynamic speaker, there are some out there, a class of entire lecture, you've lost the students half way through if you're sitting there for a long time. It's just gone. Even if you want to pay attention, you've just lost it.

When asked what techniques she thinks she learns best from, Nisha said, "I think lecture. I like to take notes. I like the teacher to talk, take notes, and stop so that we can ask questions." She stressed that there should be some interaction with the lecture saying, "You don't stand in front of the class and lecture for forty minutes and then walk out of the class. We have to have that interaction." Similarly, John, a 52-year-old white man, preferred a lecture/discussion format that involves the students. He said, "That's an excellent technique" because it "helps the student pay attention."

Leonard, a 57-year-old white man, spoke of teachers who "just basically go over the book. I mean, if I wanted to do that, I could read the book myself." He added that the instructor he had the most difficulty learning from was one who

“always talked in a monotone” and just went over what was in the book. Frank said, “That wasn’t really adding a whole lot, you know, to the course.”

When asked about lecture as a technique, Chitra said, “I think that’s the most boring thing in the world. A lot of times, like honestly, if the teacher goes up there and just talks, your mind wanders.” She said,

It’s so hard for me to pay attention. And it’s not like I’m focused; it’s not like I’m listening. And I’ve noticed teachers that go up there and lecture; they’re the ones that are just talking; they don’t, there’s not really class involvement; and just like I said, it really helps if the teacher gets involved with the students.

Orlando, a 33-year-old Hispanic man, said of lecture, “It doesn’t seem to help me [learn] just hearing the teacher talk.” He continued, “It seems like if I just hear the teacher just talk and talk it’s easier for me to tune that person out and think about other problems I have in my life.” Similarly, Connie, a 30-year-old white woman, said, “I had to like force myself to pay attention, force myself to stay awake because there was no interaction” when the teacher just lectured.

Kay said, “I cannot sit in a classroom and learn from somebody who’s just talking to me. . . . I just don’t pick up very well from that.” She said, “Definitely more visual and interactive works for me.”

These participants expressed some appreciation for the role of lecture within the college classroom. However, they did stress that the lectures should be short, interesting, and interactive. They indicated that this was a necessary condition in order to stay interested in and learn from lecture.

### *Varied Interactive Activities*

The participants in this study expressed a strong preference for a variety of interactive instructional techniques. They indicated that they learn more and retain more in classes where a variety of instructional techniques are used and where students are involved such as whole-class or small-group discussion and collaborative group projects. Janine, when referring to teachers who helped her learn, said, "Have class participation, group discussions, like work on case studies." This section will first present students' comments concerning a desire for a variety of interactive techniques. It will then present their opinions concerning discussion, both whole class and small group. Next, students' preference for collaborative group projects will be presented.

*Student involvement.* Participants expressed a preference for classes that include student involvement. Orlando said, when discussing techniques to help students learn, "I guess when it comes to relate the subject to students try to put a little bit of a mix when it comes to lecture, visual aids, group participation, not just one way but different ways of learning." Judi explained that a variety of classroom techniques helps keep students interested throughout the class. She said, "I've been in enough classrooms where I've sat totally bored that I think knowing when to move from one activity to the next is important."

Katie indicated that she prefers learning through a variety of teaching techniques. She said, "There has to be a combination. Because all lecture would be like putting you to sleep" even though some lecture may be appropriate if it is interesting. Glenda, too, indicated that she would use a variety of techniques if she were the instructor. She said she would use "small group, one on one, board,

TV, video, whatever it would take to get the material into their minds so that they are learning.” She said she prefers classes in which instructors use a variety of teaching techniques because she “learn[s] better when I do things in a different way.”

Jeff, when asked what made his favorite classes memorable, said, “I’d say it was pretty much an interactive course. The instructor interacted with the students, and we did a couple of group discussions.” He continued, “I don’t mind the lecture, but I like . . . interactive . . . .” Janine also said students should have “an active role.” She spoke of a class with an instructor whose technique she admired explaining that the students’ input and ideas were always welcome and that students “worked in small groups and there was a lot of interaction in the class.” Janine said she would want to teach in a “more conversational [manner] and pull people into conversations and get their feelings on things.” Janine said she learns best in classes where “there’s a lot of interaction from the class.”

Mellissa, a 47-year-old white woman, said the techniques she prefers are “getting the class involved, asking them questions . . . just the interaction between the teacher and the student, it brings the student into it.” She said, “That’s how I learn.” In a similar vein, Madison said she learns best when “There’s a lot of class participation.” She likes when the instructor asks questions of the students and when students are allowed to ask questions of the instructor. Madison, a 41-year-old white woman, particularly likes when instructors welcome students’ comments or experiences. Josephina, too, said if she were the teacher she “would get everybody involved.” She said she “would encourage the group interaction because it works.”

Vanessa spoke of having difficulty learning in high school and during her first attempt at college recalling that her professors at that time used lecture as their primary instructional technique. She explained that when she returned to college many years later the teachers were using more interactive techniques such as small groups. Vanessa indicated that she learns best when she is involved, either in doing research, role playing, projects, or presentations.

Debbie, a 48-year-old white woman, said,

I don't like classes where it's just a lecture and you just give no feedback and you're just trying not to nod. Somehow if the teacher can teach and get everyone involved in one way or another . . . interact somehow with the class . . . .

Both Debbie and Anne spoke of a class in which they were asked to bring in current events that related to the subject to share with the class. Debbie said, "It brought it all to life a little more." Anne, a 60-year-old white woman, continued this thought by saying, "In doing it, we learned so much more from it than you even could imagine. It was, it was just interesting, a learning experience."

When asked what teachers do that helps him learn, Ed, a 60-year-old white man, indicated that in addition to covering the material teachers need to "ask questions and . . . get other people's views." He said they should "get more participation." Katie, too, said, "I really appreciated the interaction with the instructor." She liked it when instructors invited student participation.

Orlando cited a class in which students sat facing one another. He said, "That was good. 'Cause again hearing people is one thing but hearing them and seeing their expressions is another thing. I kind of like that." When asked how

teachers helped him learn, Orlando said, "Making sure that you get them involved and you're not just there; and if the teacher gets you to participate, you're definitely going to remember things." He added, "If you are just sitting there, you might be thinking about other things, which is very easy to do; but if the teacher gets you involved, that's when you learn."

Interestingly, Nisha, who said she liked lecture when she was a student, said if she were the teacher she would use "a lot of activity, a lot of examples." She added, "You have to keep them occupied all the time. You have to come up with new things. You can't just always stand in front of the classroom and talk."

*Whole-class and small-group discussion.* Participants expressed a desire for classroom discussion either as a whole class or in small groups. Josephina expressed this preference when she said,

Actually, I do like when the whole class gets into a discussion because you get a chance to see everybody's point of view rather than just the teacher[s] when they lecture. When they open the floor to questions and comments, it also makes the subject matter a lot more interesting because sitting through a two-hour class and the teacher rambling on and on, you can get very bored and distracted.

She said, "It makes it so much more interesting, and the subject can be absorbed better because you can hear how another person might have figured that situation out." Josephina indicated that class discussions were "very interesting" and "made the class enjoyable." She said this made her "look forward to the next time I would go to class."



When asked how she would create a successful experience for her students if she were the teacher, Clara, a 43-year-old white woman, said, “A lot of discussion.” She said the discussions in her management classes provided a lot of “light bulb moments” adding that in those discussions she learned from her peers.

Mellissa said, when asked about her best learning experience, “I guess for me I like . . . more discussion, more interaction within the class.” She explained that she likes a teacher

. . . to bring out things that we’re feeling and thinking . . . rather than have the teacher stand up there and lecture for the whole time. Sometimes it gets a little monotonous. It just seems, you know, when you can bring . . . the whole class in and get their feelings and thoughts and interact with them, sometimes you can learn just as much from other students.

Mellissa explained that she thinks this kind of interactive class helps her “to stay more focused” than if the teacher is just talking.

Abdul, a 56-year-old African man, said that discussion is “one of the best way[s] of getting the adult to get involved in his own learning process.” When asked why he liked discussion, Abdul said, “I mean this give[s] you the chance to really look at what you have learned” explaining that discussion offers students the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned.

Chitra expressed a preference for whole-class as well as small-group discussions. She said,

I think it makes you open up a little more, and you're more involved with the class. It's not someone just talking and you're just listening because, like everybody says, a lot of people get sleepy sometimes. So you get to put your opinion in, and it gets you more involved.

John spoke of small group discussions saying, "Discussions were great with people who were up on the material." He indicated that these discussions provided a welcome break from the more structured class format. He said, "It still tied in with a structure and [was] organized." He explained that this kind of activity helps build skills that are needed for business meetings and that small-group discussions are a "good technique . . . because you interact with different people. You need to listen to who's speaking, you need to look somebody in the eye that maybe you haven't even seen before, and it's good practice in communication." He said that small group-discussion combines the development of communication skills with the learning of the material.

Leonard described his most memorable classes as "group discussion." He continued, "Especially when it related to current events or someone else in the class who experienced something that was relevant to that material." Leonard expressed a strong preference for current events. He said, "There was one class where we had to bring in a newspaper article and relate it to what we were reading and doing in the book and everything. It brought it all to life a little more."

*Collaborative group projects.* Some participants spoke of collaborative group projects as one of their preferred learning experiences. A majority of the

group projects these students were required to do culminated in class presentations. Participants tend to use the term “group project” and “presentation” interchangeably.

Katie said, when asked what techniques she would use if she were the instructor, “I like group work . . . . Get people together.” Leonard said, “I like the group projects.” When asked why he liked them, Leonard said, “Team involvement. Working with the other students.” Leonard said he learns and retains information better this way because “you have to take the material; and you process it to get your end result, the project.” Dorothy cited learning to work with others as a benefit of group projects, “You do have to learn to work with all different kinds of people.”

Ken explained that he prefers group work because the interaction with the other students results in creative outcomes. He said,

I like group work. Be it small groups, be it people working on a project or a question, larger groups sometimes. If the class is small enough like our human relations class, we had some really good group work. I like that because you have the interaction of the different students of all ages, all backgrounds, and their learning experiences; but when I was in business [classes], great ideas and great things came out of the groups and working in teams . . . because you help each other learn the subject, you can be creative in coming out with different solutions, and you turn that into group presentations or group papers.

Judi said that any type of interaction in the classroom helps her to remember what she has learned. When asked what kinds of interactive activities she prefers. She said,

Well, group projects, that type of thing, because if you were sent to do the project on your own, you would just have one viewpoint. And working with groups brought in a lot of different viewpoints and that helped . . . to expand your thinking . . . . [It] sometimes put you on a better course as to how you would handle a certain project . . . .”

Connie also credited projects with helping her to remember what she learned. She explained that “projects that weren’t papers were always memorable.” She said, “I remember things better when I use them in a constructive way rather than just memorize them.” Kay explained, “I do better when I have to do research. I have to find a topic, and I have to present it.” John, too, expressed a preference for learning in groups saying, “The groups . . . they were really effective because you learned.”

Students credited group work with helping to develop other skills. Janine indicated that she likes presentations because they

. . . are fun and . . . they’re good, too, because it gets you standing up in front of people and talking . . . you need to be able to talk in front of a group if you’re going to be in any kind of management position.

Mellissa’s experience working in groups was that “we motivated each other, and I think we encouraged each other.”

Joanne credited group work with “getting to know the other students.” She liked, “Meeting others, seeing similarities, seeing differences, understanding that we all have different ways that we understand and communicate information.”

Some participants had reservations about group presentations mainly because some group members do not do their share of the work. This results not only in an unequal workload but the fear that their grades will be reduced because of the poor performance of fellow group members. Although Ed acknowledged that presentations are very important in the business world, he prefers individual presentations to group presentations because

. . . there's always one person or two persons who don't want to . . . participate and do what they're supposed to do; and then everybody else, it's either one person takes up the slack and does all the work or two persons do the work.

Jeff concurred with Ed indicating that he is not “real fond of group projects” also citing the fact that other members sometimes do not do their share of the work.

Nisha expressed a dislike for group presentations saying, “I like to work by myself. . . . I would prefer to do my whole presentation and present it and know that that was mine, that was my idea.” She indicated that when she does the project alone she knows “that was my best.” Maria expressed a similar preference saying, “I don't think I like too much when the teacher get[s] us to work with others.” She explained that when the abilities in the group vary she does not “learn too much.” Maria prefers the A's she has been earning working alone.

Orlando indicated that at first he was apprehensive about working in groups thinking, "What are the other students going to think of me? They may think I'm not up to speed, and it gives you that fear." He found that once he was working in the group that "they're not there to make you feel badly, they want to help you, and then that fear goes away." Ultimately, he realized that group work was "a good way of learning." He related, "Where I'm working I am involved with groups that have to meet together, and that's experience that I got from the college."

### *Experiential Learning*

Some of the participants in this study indicated a preference for hands-on or experiential types of learning activities. Vanessa said that learning by hands-on involvement "helps me remember things."

When talking about his most memorable learning experience, Ken spoke of a sociology instructor saying, "He had us do extracurricular activities . . . to see what it's like to live in somebody else's shoes or the other side of the fence." He explained that a course assignment was for the Hispanic students to visit a Pennsylvania Dutch diner and for the white students to go to an area that was culturally different for them. Ken said,

I went to a Mexican shop at Eighth or Green and Washington, or somewhere in Reading, which was totally out of my element but just in order to see the culture . . . to cement what we were learning in that class.

. . . I would say I've learned from that. I have a greater knowledge of what I was studying . . . knowledge of cultural diversity."

Ken concluded, "If I want to go into human resource management, I'm going to have to deal with that in the marketplace."

Connie indicated that the most memorable learning experiences for her are "the things that aren't normal, that aren't just an instructor standing in front of the class and lecturing." She recounted an economics class where the instructor "had us draw pictures and we would get together in little groups." She explained, "It was like the circular flow, and I've never forgotten it." Speaking of that same instructor, Connie said, "Everything that she makes us do makes us remember. . . . We had to recite the definition of economics every class before class. You don't forget the definition of economics."

Connie continued by speaking of instructors who provided a hands-on learning experience. She remembered an accounting teacher who had the students do problems in class explaining, "It goes so fast and I know it." Connie said that this method of showing her something and then allowing her to try it reinforces learning for her. She said, "I love it. I think it works perfect[ly]." Judi, too, said she needs to work the problems to learn. She stated, "I have to be involved with it."

Clara concurred when she said that if she were the instructor, after giving students examples, she would give them problems they could work on in class. She said, "Have them do it on their own." This would enable students to ask questions before going home and trying to work the problems.

When asked to describe his ideal college class, Gregory, a 48-year-old man of African-American/South Pacific Island descent, said, "It would have to be instruction and true hands-on experiences." Similarly, Kay spoke of computer classes, saying, "Don't teach . . . . Just let me put my hands on the computer and do it." Isabel concurred saying, "My learning technique is hands-on. If they do a thing twice, the third time I do it myself." Maria agreed saying, "Hands-on for me as well. I like hands on."

### *Highlighting Real-Life Stories and Examples*

When describing classes where they learned best, participants often described classes in which the instructor included stories, real-life examples, and experiences to enhance the content. Ken expressed this when he said, "I like that in professors, when they can bring personal experiences into what is pertinent in the class." He added that if he were the instructor he would use experiences so that he "could drive home a point." He also indicated that he would "ask a lot of open-ended questions to elicit discussion" from the students so that their experiences could also be used to augment the subject being discussed. John, too, indicated a preference for "bringing people's real experiences into the classroom, even with just a lecture." In addition, Josephina commented that classes are much more interesting when the instructor includes experiences to bring the material to life.

Connie expressed a preference for incorporating current events into the class discussion because "it always ties into what we're doing and it makes the class interesting." She continued, "I just think if you can take what you're learning now and show like a current example of it, it makes a lot of difference."



Nisha said, “I like to be given a lot of examples. Especially explained in class.” Even though Nisha is a very capable student, she indicated that she preferred hearing instructors give examples rather than telling her to look in the textbook. Rick said his best instructors gave “concrete examples. . . . whether it’s their experience or somebody else’s.”

One of the most outstanding testimonials to teachers’ incorporating stories, examples, and experiences came from Vanessa who gave an account of a management class where the instructor regularly incorporated stories, examples, and experiences to enhance the course content. In a future term, when Vanessa took a more advanced management course, she found herself recalling, even during tests, the material from the previous course rather than from the current one. She said she could see the instructor from the previous course “up there saying some of the answers that I needed.” She attributed this to the connection of the material to stories, examples, and experiences that she heard in the first management class. Jeff reinforced Vanessa’s thoughts saying that when teachers include examples and stories “it gives me memory reference points when I’m trying to recall stuff.” He added that value is added to a class when instructors share their experiences and encourage students to share theirs.

Joanne said,

I think some of the best classes I’ve had were when teachers like actually showed us not just textbook knowledge but how the information really applied in the working world because you can know a lot of facts; but to really excel where it counts out in the job market, you’ve got to know how to apply those facts.

When asked how teachers could teach you to apply content, Joanne said,

They gave us practical examples. . . . We got problems that were specific to reinforcing what we learned. You even took it a step further, like some of those accounting problems you gave us where you gave us these practice problems before a test. . . . Some of them, you really had to understand the concept.

When asked about her best learning experiences, Glenda said, “The way that you teach is really good for me because you took a risk and you shared like your experiences. You gave us a lot of examples.” Kay explained that when the teacher includes real-life experiences to illustrate the content “it starts to make sense.”

#### *Visual Classroom Techniques*

From participants’ comments, it appears that most students benefit if their classroom learning environment includes visual elements. Some, in fact, find it essential in order to learn successfully. Kay spoke of a teacher who just lectured and how much better it was for her to learn when he used Power Point for a period of time. She said, “I’m better at that because I’m not just trying to catch what he’s saying. . . . I need to be able to see something.” Gregory, too, indicated that visuals are “very important” to his learning.

Ken explained that if he were the teacher he would use visual aids in his teaching. He said, “I like visual. Be it visual aids, be it Power Points, be it graphs or pictures, or animated motions. I learn a lot through the visual.” He continued by saying, “Use movies or something that would catch all the senses ‘cause I think that helps you learn when you use all your senses.” Connie concurred,

saying, "I like being able to see what they're talking about. I like visual examples."

Janine, too, said, "For me personally it's easier to visualize it and see it in a visual way." When asked what teachers do to help him learn, Jeff said, ". . . the visual . . . . That all helps me learn. It gives me reference points."

Clara explained that she liked handouts that accompanied Power Point presentations saying that they helped her a great deal. She said,

I didn't care for when some of the teachers that I had just wrote everything on the board; and you were supposed to copy it down. I mean, 'cause (a) you never got to talk about it and (b) I spent more time writing it down; and then if he was talking about it, I was too busy writing.

She added that the Power Point and the handouts helped her stay focused.

Orlando, too, spoke of the value of handouts to accompany Power Point presentations. He said, "That was helpful 'cause [the teacher was] teaching us and showing us what [she was] teaching us from the Power Points." He continued, "I like that 'cause I'm not a fast note taker," and "I could just highlight" what was important.

Judi described herself as a "very visual learner." She said, "So putting the things on the overhead, writing on the board, doing diagrams and that type of thing is very important to my type of learning. I did learn a lot from . . . that." Judi also found the handouts that accompanied Power Point presentations very helpful. She said, "I could put my own notes right on that sheet." She added, "When it came time to study for an exam, it was all right there in front of me; and it made it a lot easier to pull out the important parts." Mellissa expressed a similar preference when she said, "I'm more of a visual learner." She preferred the

Power Point and handouts saying they allowed her to focus on the key material better than just listening to a lecture, which often does not make the important material apparent. Glenda also indicated that she likes to see “things in black and white.” She said, “Let me see what I’m supposed to be getting out of this class.”

Madison expressed a strong preference for the use of visual teaching techniques. She said, “I need something written down. . . . I like them to write on the board, and I like to copy it, and I like the handouts.” She said, “I don’t retain hearing.” She, too, spoke of the value of Power Point presentations along with handouts. Katie added, “It really helps a lot for me to see it. See it either diagrammed on the board or in a Power Point presentation.”

Nisha spoke of an instructor who did not use any visuals, who just talked. Nisha said, “I know I prefer seeing something up there, an example.” Leonard added, “The courses I really enjoyed were where we had visual presentations, too, not just what was in the book.” He explained, “If . . . the teacher uses a visual presentation, it helps to drive in some things for those people who need something actually to look at.”

Anne described an economics teacher saying,

I think he’s a great teacher. . . . He explains the concepts in words, and then he gives you the graphics and the math behind it, so those who think more mathematically, which I tend to do . . . it makes a lot more sense.

And it just cements it for me, and it makes it just clearer.

Rick sums up the desire of students for visual presentations when he says if he were the instructor he “definitely would use visual aids along with the presentation.”

This chapter contains a discussion of the importance of caring instructors to the learning of the adult community college students who participated in this study. They also described their learning from other students in their college classes. Then, the participants of color commented on the cultural relevance of their college classroom experience. Lastly, students described various preferences with regard to classroom techniques and activities.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

This chapter will accomplish the following purposes. First, a summary of the findings of the study will be provided. Second, the major findings of the study will be reviewed and discussed in connection with the literature. Then, implications for practice in adult and higher education will be addressed as well as suggestions for future research. Finally, I will conclude with my own reflections.

#### Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom. This qualitative study extends the existing learning preferences literature by providing depth through interviews of participants, designed to learn of their preferences in their own words. It has also uncovered the reasons behind their stated preferences and the meaning of their new learning in light of both individual preferences and the social context of the higher education classroom. In addition, a diverse group of students was selected in order to determine how learning preferences differ based on participants' positionality and to learn the meanings diverse students place on their classroom experiences from among those who have actually experienced a variety of teaching approaches in the higher education classroom.

Social constructivism provides the primary lens through which to view this study. Constructivism emphasizes "the active participation of the knower in the

structuring processes that characterize knowing” (Mahoney, 1996, p. 29). In discussing social constructivism, Gergen (1994) notes that “knowledge is lodged within the sphere of social relatedness” (p. 30). He contends that individuals are free to construct for themselves different realities and that how the learner categorizes the world is based on tradition that is passed down through social interactions, hence, the term “social constructivism.” Schwandt (2000) argues that human beings construct knowledge to make sense of experience and they “continually test and modify these constructs in light of new experiences” (p. 197). St. Pierre-Hirtle (1996, p. 91) quotes Shor, who said that “Constructivism is a way of building knowledge about self, school, everyday experience, and society through reflection and meaning making” about individual and social experiences. Social constructivism was chosen as the primary lens for this study because each learner takes away from a class a somewhat different understanding, shaped by his or her personal interpretive framework, prior knowledge, and motivation; and learners will mutually influence the sense each makes of their common experiences (Clark, 1998) because of the interaction and social context of the classroom. It is this meaning that this study sought to understand. Social constructivists believe that cognitive growth takes place primarily through social exchanges such as discussion and negotiation (Stage et al., 1998). Stage quotes Vygotsky, who contends that individual meaning comes from language and social interaction.

While the learning preferences literature mentioned earlier in this chapter is a primary part of the conceptual framework of this study, it is silent concerning the gender, race, class, and culture of the study participants. Thus, the literature

addressing the concern for a more inclusive adult learning environment was included. Although often referred to by the broad term “multicultural education,” various authors have expressed this concern using terms such as cultural relevance, antiracist education, antioppressive education, critical multiculturalism, and feminist pedagogy. In addition, research literature reporting the impact of gender, race, class, and culture on students’ educational experiences was reviewed.

Although not originally included as part of the conceptual framework, literature on caring was included after the findings of the study indicated a strong preference for instructors who care about their students. Caring is defined primarily as caring about the academic success of students.

This study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the characteristics of the learning environment preferred by adult community college students? (b) What are the underlying reasons for adult community college students’ stated preferences? (c) What is the perceived relationship of adult community college students between their individual learning and the social context of the classroom? (d) How do adult community college students’ differences based on gender, race, class, and culture affect their stated learning preferences? (e) How do diverse community college students make meaning of their new learning?

The findings of this study are grouped into four major categories: (1) the role of a caring instructor in creating a context for learning, (2) learning from other students in the college classroom, (3) cultural relevance of the educational classroom, and (4) classroom techniques and activities.



First, caring on the part of the instructor emerged as an important concern of the participants in this study. Participants referred to caring as caring about students' educational success. Some of the participants spoke of caring instructors as an engaged, connecting presence to students and course content. Such instructors are described as personable, available to students, interesting and enthusiastic, and respecting and understanding students. In addition, participants spoke of the motivation that was provided to them by caring instructors.

Second, participants in this study spoke of the important role other students in their college classrooms played in their learning. Some participants spoke of learning from other students' differing experiences and perspectives. Some reported learning from other students' diversity—age, cultural, racial, ethnic, and international as well as socioeconomic and physical ability. Others indicated that their academic learning was enhanced by other students through participation in study groups and the motivation provided by other students. In summary, they reported learning from other students' experiences and perspectives and gaining a greater understanding of others' cultures, as well as claiming academic benefits.

Third, participants who were people of color, both domestic minorities and international students, spoke about the cultural relevance of their college classroom experiences. Some participants indicated that they expected to adapt to American culture and did not expect their classes to relate to their personal culture indicating that they were in college to learn specific information and expected it to be presented in a certain way since they were in the United States.

Some of the participants spoke of language issues and the varied sensitivity of instructors and other students in dealing with their second language needs. Still others reflected on experiencing some ethnocentricity and stereotyping in their college classrooms.

Finally, participants in this study expressed an interest in having instructors who are knowledgeable, able to explain content, and organized. Participants acknowledged that at times lecture is an appropriate classroom technique but stressed that lectures should be short and interactive. They also indicated a very strong preference for a variety of interactive activities in their college classes such as whole- and small-group discussions and collaborative group projects. Experiential learning was also favored by many of the participants as well as real-life stories and examples, which they say help them to learn and retain content. In addition, they expressed a desire for visual classroom techniques to enhance their learning.

#### Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study will now be discussed in relation to the pertinent literature. I will highlight how the findings of the study relate to, expand on, or contradict some of the prior studies that were reviewed earlier.

##### *A Caring Instructor: Creating a Context for Learning*

This study revealed the importance that adult community college students place on caring instructors. Neither the learning preferences literature nor the diversity literature explicitly address caring although a desire for caring instructors may be implied in that literature. Yet, in this study, the extent that participants emphasized the importance of caring cannot be overemphasized.

This is an important finding because, while there is some implied discussion in relation to connection and relationship in the adult education literature, there is minimal discussion within adult and higher education specifically on caring, though Noddings (1992) discusses it at length in relation to K-12 education.

Participants in this study of adult community college students indicated a strong preference for college instructors who are caring and mainly defined caring as facilitating student success as did the authors in Chapter 2 such as Apps (1996) and Noddings (1992). Participants preferred instructors who behaved as though they cared about their students' success and not as though they were there just to receive a paycheck. Participants in Belenky et al.'s (1986) study of women indicated a need for "connected teaching," which centers around relationship and caring. The adult community college students in this study perceived caring instructors as understanding the importance of education to the students' futures; they described caring instructors as being willing to do whatever they can to assure students' academic success. As Cranton and Carusetta (2004) note, "We cannot be authentic in teaching and ignore or not care about students, for that is what teaching is—helping others to learn" (p. 21).

The participants spoke of caring instructors as an engaged, connecting presence to students and course content. They described the relationships they had with caring instructors and how that connection benefited them as students. This engaged, connecting presence took several forms—being personable, being available, being interesting and enthusiastic, and respecting and understanding students.

Some spoke of instructors being personable as an important characteristic saying it helps to be able to see the human side of the instructor and to feel that they really want to be there. Rick explained that he wanted “to be able to see the human side of the teacher.” Similarly, others suggested that this helps students to relax and not be fearful, which sets the stage for learning. Madison, for example, said, “The student could be fearful and fear would stop, I think, the learning.” Palmer (1998) spoke of such fear when he said that students’ fear acts to disconnect them from the teacher. Personable instructors are also described as approachable by students when they need their help. Katie spoke of an instructor who was “very, very approachable.” She said, “You could ask him anything and get an explanation.” Similarly, the teachers in Cranton and Carusetta’s (2004) study of “authentic” teachers would share aspects of themselves with students, which would be a characteristic of a personable instructor.

Participants described caring instructors as being available to students outside the classroom either in their offices or by phone or e-mail. Students spoke of teachers who encouraged students to contact them when need be because they want to see students succeed. They explained that it is important to know that the teacher will be there for them when they need them. Josephina expressed this opinion by saying, “A lot of teachers here I’ve noticed want to see you succeed. . . . They’re going to try their best to make themselves available to you no matter the hour.” Burke and Nierenbert (1998) addressed this aspect of caring teachers by saying that teachers exhibit caring by being available and willing to help students.

Instructors who are interesting and enthusiastic about teaching were perceived as caring about their jobs and about getting material across to students. Participants indicated that when instructors are interesting and enthusiastic students become more attentive and therefore they learn and remember more. Debbie said, "I do feel that enthusiasm is a big part." Jeff believes teachers should "try to make it interesting enough" to get students' attention and hold their interest. Palmer (1998) emphasizes having a relationship with the subject or knowledge being taught as well as the student. This relationship seems to generate the kind of enthusiasm that both Debbie and Jeff are speaking about. Bell hooks (1994) also addressed this when she spoke of "engaged pedagogy" and proposes a classroom that is dynamic and exciting and based on students' needs and experiences.

Participants expressed a desire for instructors who respect and understand them, stating that instructors should try to understand the life situations of the students in their classes. Respect as described by the participants takes the form of teachers respecting students' views and not trying to force their own perspectives onto the students. Kay said, "Understand that people are different. . . . You want to respect who I am and what my beliefs are, and don't trample them." Caring is defined in the literature as being understood and respected (Noddings, 1992) and being sensitive to students' needs (Palmer, 1998). Belenky et al. (1986) say that "connected teaching" includes treating learners courteously as equals. They refer to the "midwife teacher," who would assist students in giving birth to their own thoughts. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) speak of a mutual respect between learners and instructors, and hooks

(1994) urges teachers “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students” in order “to provide the necessary condition where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (pp. 14-15).

According to these participants, caring instructors play a very important role in motivating them to work harder and to be more successful as students. Some credit caring instructors with motivating them to persevere in hard courses where they might otherwise have given up. Participants explained that adult students deal with many factors outside of school that could serve to impede their academic success, sometimes even resulting in not continuing their education. Caring instructors are credited with motivating students to stay in school and continue their education. As Judi said, “Caring in an instructor infuses you [the student] with the desire to achieve.” Madison, when asked what effect caring had on her said, “It completely causes me to soar.” This is similar to the findings of the Burke and Nierenbert (1998) study of college juniors who explained that instructors were inspirational to them.

The findings in this study are consistent with the caring literature, particularly Noddings (1992), who specifically emphasizes caring, and the many adult and higher educators who discuss teaching from the heart (Apps, 1996) or the importance of creating community and the environment in adult and higher education that also highlights relationship and connection or authenticity in order to better facilitate student success (Belenky et al., 1986; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; hooks, 1994; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Palmer, 1998). These students’ statements serve to reinforce the attitude that caring is an important characteristic that acts to make teachers more effective. Participants are not

saying that caring is the only or most important characteristic they look for in effective teachers; but they are stressing that caring is foundational to other important characteristics such as being knowledgeable, organized, and conducting an interesting class.

Social constructivism, which provides the primary lens through which to view this study, places emphasis on social interactions as well. Therefore, a socially constructive learning environment would be conducive to the caring that the participants in this study desire in their college instructors, an environment emphasizing the relationship between the teacher and the student. Although andragogy has traditionally focused on the individual learner's experience, given its emphasis on learners' participation and discussion of their own life experiences, there is an implicit assumption that much learning takes place in a social context through the influence of social interaction. Such interaction can be encouraged through the set up of a learning environment by a caring facilitator. This study does indeed highlight the importance of caring and brings it to the forefront, whereas it has been more or less implied in other discussions in adult education.

#### *Learning from Other Students in the College Classroom*

Social constructivism was chosen as the primary lens for this study because an important part of the study was to learn students' views on classroom activities and how their learning was impacted by other students' ideas and their interactions with them. The social constructivists' view is that each learner takes away from a class a somewhat different understanding, shaped by his or her personal interpretive framework, prior knowledge, and

motivation, and learners will mutually influence the sense each makes of their common experiences (Clark, 1998) because of the interaction and social context of the classroom.

As Gergen (1994) said, although an individual's reality is unique, that reality is influenced by factors in the social world surrounding the individual. Students construct their own new meanings in a sociocultural context rather than students simply acquiring the meanings that others espouse (Atwater, 1996). Learners, when given the opportunity, will mutually influence the sense each makes of their common experiences (Clark, 1998). Knowledge is constructed by individuals interacting with others through discussion and collaborative activities.

The participants in this study validated the social constructivists' view by reporting that they learned in a number of ways from the other students who were in their college classes. They indicated that in addition to learning from their instructors, they gained new insights from both the work and personal experiences that were shared by their fellow classmates as well as their differing perspectives. Glenda said that listening to other students makes classes more interesting and helps her to better absorb information.

When speaking of learning from other students, some participants spoke of learning from students who were older or younger than they. They said that this interaction with other students opened their eyes to different viewpoints and caused them to be more open minded. Kay expressed the opinion of several participants when she talked about how interacting with a younger student who was very different from her helped her to dispel some stereotypes and allowed her to "grow as a person." She said she has learned a lot more than "knowledge"



from being around people who are different from her. This finding of the study is similar to what Kasworm (2005) noted in her study of the intergenerational community college classroom that “Many of these adult students entered into colearner relationships with younger students.” One of her participants said, “You learn what they’re experiencing and I think it goes both ways” (p. 16).

Some of Kasworm’s (2005) participants reported that they helped younger students through informal counseling. This is similar to the experience of Judi, a participant in this study, who said that younger students came to her for help on a regular basis. Adult students in Kasworm’s study initially were concerned about being in classrooms with younger students and discovered that their concerns were unfounded. Kasworm’s participants reported that they were accepted by the majority of younger students, consistent with the findings in this study of adult community college students, who report friendships with younger students and collaborating with younger students on coursework. For example, Judi, a 53-year-old white woman, spoke of becoming friends with 26-year-old Nisha; they remain friends to this day. Although some of the adults in Kasworm’s study reported a few hostile or intimidated younger students, participants in this study spoke of only their positive experiences with younger students in the classroom.

Participants also spoke of learning from other students who represented various types of diversity—cultural, racial, ethnic, international, as well as socioeconomic and physical ability. Connie spoke of the value of what can be learned from the different people who bring differing perspectives to the classroom. Kay said that learning about the different people in her classes has been the “biggest learning experience” for her, and Glenda spoke of how she

used to try to “inflict” her values and beliefs on other people and said that she has gained a better understanding of differences and the need to be accepting of others’ differences. These students indicated that their learning in their college classrooms would have been quite different if not for the diversity of the other students, which is substantiated by Gurin et al.’s (2002) study of the effects of classroom diversity and informal interaction on the learning of racially diverse college students. They reported that “the actual experiences students have with diversity consistently and meaningfully affect important learning and democracy outcomes of a college education” (p. 358).

John spoke of the diversity in his college classes helping him to learn to be comfortable among different people and to be able to communicate with those who are different. Kay explained that she thinks getting to know more about other people’s lives will help her in her future career in human resources. This viewpoint is substantiated by a quote from an *amicus* brief filed on behalf of the University of Michigan by General Motors (Gurin et al., 2002), which states,

Diversity in academic institutions is essential to teaching students the human relations and analytic skills they need to thrive and lead in the work environments of the twenty-first century. These skills include the abilities to work well with colleagues and subordinates from diverse backgrounds; to view issues from multiple perspectives; and to anticipate and respond with sensitivity to the needs and cultural differences of highly diverse customers, colleagues, employers, and global business partners. (p. 361)

This statement is particularly relevant in light of the fact that the adult community college students in this study are business majors. The diversity in their college classrooms not only serves to broaden their perspectives but it also arms them with a necessary skill that they will need in their work life.

Participants also spoke of ways in which their learning of course content was enhanced by other students' academic expertise. They spoke of participating with other students in study groups and of being motivated by their interactions with other students. They spoke of how learning difficult material or completing difficult projects was made easier because they worked with other students, each helping the other in some way. They also found the interaction with other students to be motivational to them. They described occasions when they were discouraged and found it difficult to go on; but through the interaction and help of other students, they were encouraged to persevere.

Clark (1998) stated that learning is both individual and social and that in the context of the classroom learners are given the opportunity to mutually influence the sense each makes of their common experiences through dialogue, engagement of ideas, and asking questions of each other and of the instructor. Social constructivism is rooted in the idea that knowledge is constructed by individuals interacting with others. The opinions of these students concerning the impact of other students on their college learning experience stands as a testament to the social constructivist lens through which this study has been framed. These students' words reinforce the social constructivist view that learning is constructed by the social context of the classroom and that individual meaning comes from language and social interaction.

### *Cultural Relevance of the Educational Experience*

The population of participants for this study of adult community college students was diverse. A major issue that arises when teaching students who are from diverse backgrounds based on factors such as gender, race, class, and culture is whether or not the classroom environment is culturally relevant to all of the students. Literature addressing multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism, antiracist education, antioppressive education, culturally relevant adult education, and critical and feminist pedagogy was reviewed in Chapter 2. Each of these approaches focuses on and emphasizes particular differences: cultural relevance on cultural differences; antiracist pedagogy on racial differences; antioppressive education on various differences; critical multiculturalism and feminist pedagogy on differences of gender race, and class; and critical pedagogy on class. Each approach attempts to promote an educational environment that is more inclusive and that promotes social and political equality regardless of differences. Each discourse, in its own way, has the underlying goal of promoting a more equal education that can be instrumental in improving the conditions of people who are marginalized because of their differences. The various discourses attend to power in differing degrees and the manner in which they suggest creating equality differs as well.

In this study of adult community college students, participants of color, both domestic minorities and international students, were asked a series of questions designed to delve into their perceptions about the cultural relevance of their college classroom experiences. Most of those interviewed indicated that they expected to adapt to the dominant culture in the United States and did not

expect their classes to relate to their personal culture. Further, those not born in the United States indicated that they were in college to learn specific information and they expected it to be presented in a certain way since they were in the United States. This is not to suggest that they wanted the teaching to be culturally irrelevant or unresponsive to their own cultural contexts, however. But they did not expect it to be particularly reflective of their culture of origin. However, all participants wanted instructors to be respectful of and sensitive to their cultural backgrounds. In addition, some of the international participants reported varying sensitivity on the part of instructors and other students to language issues, centered around their lack of understanding of some of the language used and the fact that they are not native English speakers. Some also reflected on the ethnocentricity and stereotyping they observed in their college classrooms.

Many in the field of adult and higher education contend that learners from already marginalized cultural backgrounds resist education that is based in the dominant culture and that it is important to attend to the cultures of the learners (Guy, 1999; Rendon, Garcia, & Person, 2004; Sheared & Sissel, 2001). The findings in this study of adult community college students indicate that a lack of direct tie-in to their culture of origin in their classroom experiences has not been a serious issue for these participants for the most part. Josephina, for example, stated this clearly when she said,

I have to admit, yes, sometimes it doesn't exactly fit into my world and what I deal with on an everyday basis; but I do realize that I cannot stay in just my world. I have to spread my wings and learn about others and know what's actually out there for me.

She went on to explain that as she prepares for working in the American business world she relies on what her teachers share with her to help her be successful when she begins her career. Chitra concurred saying that she did not expect her business classes to be culturally relevant like she might expect in some other subjects such as humanities or social studies. Maria added that when you're in school you're there to learn the subjects and you're not concerned about cultural issues.

These findings, however, must be interpreted with caution. The fact that at first glance they did not indicate culture was a major issue for them could be due to a number of factors. First, it is apparent by their presence in the college classroom that the participants in this study have a certain amount of perseverance even when the classroom is not reflective of their own culture. Second, they are business majors, which may indicate a higher tolerance for adjusting to the capitalistic world of business and, therefore, more accepting and willing to adjust and certainly less likely to question the capitalistic system on which business is often based. Further, as Noel, Michaels, and Levas (2003) suggest, business students are often a bit more conservative and may not challenge structural systems. Third, this study accounts only for those students

who are still in college; it does not account for the students who may have been discouraged because of a lack of cultural relevance and who have already dropped out.

It is also important to highlight here that some participants did discuss ways in which there was varying sensitivity to issues of culture in their college classes. Some spoke of issues surrounding their ability to speak and understand English in their classes, especially when they first came to the United States and varying levels of sensitivity to language issues among teachers. One example is Maria who spoke of being frustrated by teachers who used examples that were strictly based on the United States and that had no meaning to her. Even when she explained this to her instructor, he continued without explaining the meaning of what he had said. Maria also spoke of an instructor who asked her to not ask questions in class because of her difficulty with English. She found this last experience very hurtful and said she never spoke again in that class. This is reminiscent of Johnson-Bailey's (2001) study of reentry black women in higher education, who dealt with lack of cultural connection sometimes through silence, sometimes through resistance, and sometimes through negotiation. Maria obviously resorted to silence in this instance. Maria's experience is similar to the Anglophone Caribbean immigrant women in a study by Alfred (2003) who experienced marginality, alienation, and isolation because they found themselves in an environment that was not sensitive to their cultural differences. However, Maria has succeeded in her academic pursuits in spite of this negative experience. Again, I would suggest that the fact that Maria remains in college is a

tribute to her perseverance in an environment that does not at times honor her culture. The question remains: How many students have been discouraged by such circumstances and given up on their educational pursuits?

Other participants reported seeing an attitude of ethnocentricity in their college classroom experiences. They were amazed at the lack of interest in other cultures and other people. Vanessa spoke of a lack of interest by other students, observing frowns and complete silence, when she tried to bring up diversity issues in class. Those that attended American elementary and secondary schools reported that little attention was paid to diversity at that level as well.

In summary, any lack of cultural relevance that the participants in this study may have experienced was not an issue that deterred them from achieving their educational goals unlike that reported in some of the literature in Chapter 2. For example, Aiken et al. (2001) reported that racism and gender subordination acted as strong deterrents to adults' participation in an RN completion program. They reported being discouraged by perceptions of themselves as the "other" as well as institutionalized racism. While the students in this study may have experienced similar barriers, they did not discuss these very directly and they did not let them deter their participation.

For the most part, participants in this study reported feeling accepted and being a part of the classroom experience. Even though some of the participants did describe some frustrating and demoralizing experiences in their college classrooms because of their cultural differences, they persevered and succeeded in spite of them. One might question how many other such students have been discouraged by negative experiences and have discontinued their educational



journeys. It could be that these participants are the survivors and that those students who found their educational experience devoid of cultural relevance are no longer in the college classroom. Does the fact that these students are business majors play a part in their attitudes about the cultural relevance of their college classrooms? Is it because of the conservative nature of business majors and their acceptance of the capitalistic business environment that they are likely to persevere even in light of adverse conditions? Are they more willing to adapt because they want to be able to fit into the American business environment? One can only speculate about the answers to these questions. Regardless of the answers, it cannot be emphasized enough that educators need to take special care to be culturally sensitive in their interactions with students. It is also worth noting that these students never mentioned the issue of power. Further research is needed to provide insight into the impact of the cultural relevance of the classroom experience on adult college students and to learn more about students who have discontinued their education because of a lack of cultural relevance of their classroom experience.

#### *Classroom Techniques and Activities*

The learning preferences of the adult community college students in this study indicate these adult students prefer a classroom that is a mixture of learner-centered and teacher-centered pedagogical strategies. As noted in Chapter 2, findings of previous studies of learning preferences of adult students have yielded mixed results. Some studies report participants expressed a preference for a learner-centered environment that is organized around students' goals and experiences and in which students are more self directed and help to

determine their own learning activities. Other studies indicate adult students prefer a teacher-centered mode of instruction where the teacher is in control, organized, knowledgeable, and who predominately lectures. Additional studies report that participants have a preference for a mixed learning environment, which refers to a classroom learning environment that includes a combination of learner-centered and teacher-centered environmental factors.

It should be noted, however, that the studies that were reviewed in Chapter 2 do not include adequate demographic description of the respondents. Since those earlier studies focused on adult students, the age of the students is indicated. However, the earlier research tells us nothing about other demographic characteristics of the participants such as gender, race, class, and culture. Since higher education classrooms are not comprised of generic adult students, these differences based on students' positionality are important considerations in designing learning experiences to effectively serve all learners.

By contrast to earlier studies, this study sought to explore the learning preferences of a diverse group of adult community college students and does provide the demographics of the participants, which are discussed in depth in Chapters 3 and 4. It is interesting to note, however, that the preferences relating to classroom techniques and activities that emerged in this study did not seem to be related to the positionality of the students. There was a great deal of consensus concerning learning preferences across gender, race, class, and culture. In addition, the participants in this study are students in the business division of a community college whereas the studies cited in Chapter 2 generally do not indicate the majors of the students and are a mixture of undergraduate

and graduate students with a very small representation from community colleges. The learning preferences literature was also silent concerning the reasons attributed to students' learning preferences. This study delved into not only students' preferences but also the reasons they cite for those preferences.

As stated above, the findings of this study of adult community college students are consistent with the preferences of the respondents in the mixed preference studies cited in Chapter 2 in that these students indicate a preference for a classroom that is a combination of a learner-centered and teacher-centered environment. The findings of this study concerning participants' preferred classroom techniques and activities will now be reviewed arranged in categories of preference that allow for a logical presentation, not necessarily in the order of preference.

*Instructors who are knowledgeable, able to explain content, and organized.* Although preferences for a number of different techniques and classroom activities emerged from this study, foundational to these was a need for instructors to be knowledgeable about the subject and able to explain it in a way that students can comprehend. Participants also want instructors to run an organized classroom; they want to have a plan and see it carried out in a meaningful way

Participants understandably want to be taught by instructors who have a strong knowledge of the content. However, they also want those instructors to be able to explain the material to students in a way that they can understand. They do not want to take classes where they will be predominantly teaching themselves. Adult students, who have many demands on their time, want

teachers who take the time to help them understand. Some participants indicated that they do not learn as well when they just read the textbook, and they rely heavily on instructors who can help them understand the course content. Katie expressed a preference for knowledgeable and organized teachers because they gain her respect. She also said one of her favorite teachers stood out because of “how hard he worked at getting me to understand that complicated stuff.” Glenda spoke of the limited time adult students have to devote to studying and stressed how valuable it is when teachers really explain content so that students can understand it. Kay said, “It’s got to be structured.” She added, “I need somebody that I know really knows it.” Janine indicated that she does much better when an instructor is organized and explains material clearly. A preference for the instructor to be knowledgeable is among the top preferences in some of the studies of adult students (Slotnick et al., 1993; Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986) cited in Chapter 2.

Participants also found learning easier when their instructors were organized. They appreciated an organized classroom where it was clear what was expected of them. Again, they cited their busy schedules. Rick indicated a need for an organized teacher indicating that he doesn’t “have a whole lot of extra time.” Participants also indicated that when instructors are organized and make it clear what is expected, students have a better chance of learning. Kay summarized this concern by saying that although she likes interactive activities she still needs an instructor who is knowledgeable and who is “up there telling us how the class is supposed to be.” Adults in a study by Slotnick et al. (1993) indicated a preference for instructors who were organized, and adult students at

Cleveland State University said that “students need structure” (Tracy & Schutteberg, 1986). Ommen et al. (1979) reported on adult students who wanted a classroom characterized by definite structure and preferred instructors to fill the role of authority figure.

*Short, interactive lectures.* Although lecture did not stand out as a preferred classroom technique of most of the participants, the value of lecture used in small doses at the right time was appreciated especially if the instructor was dynamic, knowledgeable, and interesting. Students expressed a minimal preference for lecture. They recognized the need for instructors, at times, to lecture to the class but definitely preferred if those lectures were interactive. Ken sums up the predominant attitude expressed in this study concerning lecture by saying that his ideal class would involve “more discussion than lecture” but that he valued a “dynamic” lecture that brings in the knowledge of the instructor. Students indicated a preference for instructors talking in class in a conversational style and bringing in real-life experiences and examples. If the instructor uses straight lecture without involving the students, participants report not being able to stay attentive, which results in little learning. Adult students at the University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh reported an overwhelming preference for a lecture/discussion instructional mode (Check, 1984) while adult students at the University of Southern California indicated that the lecture method of instruction was the most efficient use of their time and provided the clearest presentation (Bielby, 1980). In Preston’s (1976) study of adult community college students, women over the age of 30 strongly preferred traditional lectures as did respondents in Graham’s (1987, 1988) studies of community college students.

*Varied interactive activities.* The participants in this study expressed a strong preference for a variety of interactive instructional techniques such as whole-class or small-group discussion and collaborative group projects. They indicated that variety in classroom activities helps to keep them interested throughout the class. In addition, they indicated the value of different techniques to reach more students who have different learning styles. Students credit interactive activities as helping them learn more effectively saying that when they are involved in the class they remember more. Some indicated that they enjoyed discussions because they make the material much more interesting and they allow them to hear other students' perspectives. Clara described "light bulb moments" as a result of discussions in her classes. John indicated that discussions in class combined the development of communication skills with the learning of the material. Some of the studies reviewed in Chapter 2 reported that students welcomed class discussion (Donaldson et al., 2000; Sheckley, 1988)

Some students spoke of collaborative group projects as one of their preferred learning experiences. They spoke of liking to work in teams with other students and pointed out the value of learning to work with other people. Leonard said he learns and retains information better when he works on group projects because he has to take the material and process it. Many of the group projects culminated in group presentations; and some students cited the value of practicing this skill, which they know they will need in the workplace. Although not all students like working on group projects, most see the educational value of this kind of learning activity; and some enjoy the social value of working with other students. The adult undergraduates in Donaldson et al.'s (2000) study indicated

that they look for projects that actively involve students. Interactive activities would be at the heart of a social constructivist classroom. Atwater (1996) encourages participatory activities in which diverse learners can work together so that meaningful communication can take place. Discussion and group activities are examples of teaching strategies that can promote this type of meaningful communication among diverse students.

*Experiential learning and real-life examples.* Some of the participants in this study indicated a preference for experiential or hands-on types of learning activities. They explained that they had some exciting and memorable learning experiences that involved experiential techniques. Vanessa credits hands-on involvement with helping her to remember what she has learned, and Connie spoke of an instructor who provided time in class for students to practice what they had learned and indicated that it reinforced her learning. Adult undergraduate students in a study by Raven and Jimmerson (1992) similarly expressed a desire for learning activities in which they can get involved.

When describing classes where they learned best, participants often described instructors who included stories, real-life examples, and experiences to enhance the content. Ken explained that instructors used real-life experiences and examples to drive home a point and also pointed out the value of including students' experiences. Participants indicated that when stories and examples are used they have a better understanding and retention of information. Adult undergraduate students in a study by Donaldson et al. (2000) said they look to professors for examples in their teaching; however, that study does not delve into why.

*Visual classroom techniques.* Participants indicated that along with the other techniques that instructors may be using they benefit if their classroom learning environment includes a visual element. Some students find visual aids essential in order to learn successfully claiming that they help students understand and retain the content of the class. The learning preferences literature did not indicate a preference for a visual element in the classroom. However, participants in this study of adult community college students emphasized the importance of visual enhancements to their learning success. Participants (Judi and Mellissa) described themselves as visual learners. Ken said, "I like visual. . . . I learn a lot through the visual." Similarly, Kay said she needs "to be able to see something."

*Summary.* The participants in this study clearly reinforce the conclusions of the studies cited earlier that call for a mixed preference—a combination of learner-centered and teacher-centered classroom environment. They expressed a desire for a teacher-centered classroom when they said they wanted to be taught by instructors who are knowledgeable about their subject matter and who can explain content in a way that aids their understanding. They want instructors who organize their classes in a way that students can learn and clearly see what is expected of them as students. Even though lecture is not their preferred mode of instruction, they do see the value of an interesting lecture at the right time, especially if the lecture is interactive in nature.

In addition, participants expressed a desire for a learner-centered classroom when they showed a strong interest in a variety of interactive classroom activities such as whole-class and small-group discussion citing that



interactive activities keep their attention, help them to understand material, and aid retention of what they have learned. The interest in experiential learning expressed by the participants is also an example of a learner-centered classroom. Again, they cited a preference for interactive activities because such activities helped keep students' interest and helped them to understand and retain information.

When looking back at the studies reviewed in the learning preferences literature, one may ask why students expressed particular preferences. One thing that was not clear in those studies was which activities the respondents had actually been exposed to. It could be speculated that some indicated a preference for what they had been accustomed to. In this study of adult community college students this information was available because one of the criteria for participation in the study was that students had to have been exposed to a wide variety of classroom learning techniques and activities. Students can have a better understanding of what they prefer if they have first-hand knowledge of the various alternatives.

The strong preference for interactive techniques and activities serves to substantiate the choice of a social constructivist lens for this study. Gergen (1994) says that although an individual's reality is unique, that reality is influenced by factors in the social world surrounding the individual. Social constructivism emphasizes the social relatedness of learners (Clark, 1998) and suggests that learners will mutually influence the sense each makes of their common experiences because of the interaction and social context of the classroom. Social constructivists recommend a classroom that includes

communication (Gergen, 1994; St. Pierere Hirtle, 1996), dialogue (Merrian & Caffarella, 1999), conversation (Clark, 1998), participatory activities (Atwater, 1996), and collaborative learning (Stage et al., 1998). Clark (1998) encourages educators to use a variety of methods that promote communication that can socially influence learners as well as enhance understanding and remembering. The adult community college students that participated in this study bear witness to the premises of social constructivism when they testify to the importance of the use of interactive techniques and activities in the classroom to facilitate their learning.

#### Interdependence of the Findings

Although the findings of this study are presented in separate sections, they are interrelated aspects of the preferred learning environment of the adult community college students who participated in this study. Participants in this study have expressed a preference for more interactive teaching techniques and activities as well as a caring instructor. A caring instructor is likely to create a classroom environment in which students feel freer to interact. A safe and open environment created by a caring instructor could create an atmosphere in which students would be encouraged to participate in interactive activities, which they claim help them to learn and retain information.

Participants in this study also indicated that they learn a great deal from the other students in their college classes. In an interactive classroom created by a caring instructor, students are provided opportunities to share their experiences and viewpoints, therefore, facilitating their learning from one another.

In addition, the adult community college students in this study claim that when they learn more about one another they gain a better understanding of individual differences and a greater appreciation for others and their cultures. An interactive classroom created by a caring instructor could facilitate this learning as well, which can add to the cultural relevance of students' classroom experiences.

In conclusion, the findings of this study are not only important in their own right; but they are also interdependent upon one another for creating a learning environment in which a diverse group of adult students can openly engage in learning from their teachers and from one another and in which they feel accepted and valued.

#### Implications for Practice

The findings in this study of adult community college students can inform the practice of teachers in higher and adult education in a number of ways. First, there is an overarching desire for instructors who show that they care about their students, especially about their academic success. Participants in this study have reported a strong impact on their learning when they perceive that their instructors care and have described caring instructors in a number of ways. By looking at these various descriptions, it may be apparent what instructors should do to achieve to better meet their students' academic needs. Participants say that caring instructors are personable, available, interesting and enthusiastic, and respect and understand students. College instructors can engage students in their classrooms by being personable in their interactions with students both individually and in the context of the class itself. They can be available to

students to answer questions and provide additional help outside the classroom. They can make an effort to make their classes interesting and teach in an enthusiastic manner. Instructors can also treat students with respect and understanding. Participants have reported that when they perceive their instructors as caring it serves as a powerful motivator for them to persevere and achieve.

Second, participants in this study reported that they learn a great deal from the other students in their college classrooms. They report learning from the experiences and perspectives of the diverse group of students they encounter in their classes. They explained that learning from the other students not only helped them better understand course material but that it also helped them gain a better understanding of people who are different from them. They also recounted the value of studying with other students and the motivational impact of the other students in their classes. If college instructors have an understanding of the value of this learning, they can structure their classroom activities to include interactive activities such as discussions and group projects to take advantage of this valuable learning experience in order to enhance their students' learning. In addition, they can encourage their students to form study groups, pointing out the value that other students have obtained from working together.

Third, although most of the students in this study indicated they expected to adapt to American culture since they were in American classrooms, it has not been determined by this study how many students of diverse backgrounds actually did not persevere because of a lack of cultural relevance of their classes.

A college instructor could perhaps retain more students by being more aware of the cultural differences in the classroom and making an effort to be more inclusive through what is taught and the manner in which it is taught. Some participants in this study referred to difficulties they encountered in their college classes associated with the fact that English is not their first language. Further, some were treated poorly because of it. Instructors need to be aware of the strong impact their words and actions have on students and should make an effort to learn more about how to work in a positive manner with diverse students to aid retention and help facilitate their success.

Finally, participants in this study indicated a strong preference for interactive techniques and activities in the classroom. College instructors need to be aware that although students do understand the need for a lecture, they indicate that they learn better when the lectures are short, interesting, and interactive. They report understanding and remembering more when instructors include real-life stories and examples as well as visual aids along with the lecture. Participants indicated a strong preference for a variety of interactive activities such as whole-class and small-group discussion and collaborative group projects as well as experiential activities. Since the time spent in the classroom is intended to enable students to understand and retain information and since participants in this study clearly indicate that the above methods enhance their learning, college instructors need to incorporate these methods into their teaching.

## Suggestions for Future Research

Previous research, which is cited in Chapter 2, was conducted to determine the learning preferences of adult students in higher education. However, that research did not tell us who the participants were except that they were adults. It was lacking further description of the participants such as their gender, race, class, and culture. This study of adult community college students is comprised of a diversity of gender, race, class, and culture and provides descriptions of the participants. In addition, readers of the previous learning preferences research did not know the reasons behind respondents' stated preferences. This study includes in the students' own words the reasons for their stated preferences. In the previous studies, not knowing what educational techniques and activities they had experienced left one wondering whether they were not aware of other techniques and activities and whether they were just stating a preference for what they knew. In this study, criteria for participation included exposure to a wide variety of educational techniques and activities. The previous research used predominantly quantitative methods. This study is qualitative, providing rich descriptions of participants' preferences in their own words.

Although this study has added to the knowledge we have about adult college students' learning preferences, areas for future research remain. First, the participants in this study were or had been recently students in the business division at Reading Area Community College. It would be interesting to study students in differing majors to determine if they expressed the same preferences. Business students tend to be more conservative and accepting of a capitalistic

environment. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the learning preferences of students in different programs of study such as humanities or social studies. Further studies could delve into whether students from different majors would place as much importance on a caring instructor as the business students in this study did or whether their opinions concerning the cultural relevance of their classrooms would differ from those of the business majors.

Second, the participants in this study were students or had recently been students in a community college. Further learning preferences research might be conducted with students in four-year colleges and universities as well as those enrolled in graduate programs. It would be interesting to determine if there is a difference in learning preferences among students in different types of colleges and at different levels of education. This further research could focus on a number of different areas. Various research studies could be conducted, each focusing on a different aspect of this current study. For example, research could be conducted to determine their desired techniques and activities. It would also be interesting to learn how much importance students in four-year institutions and graduate programs place on a caring instructor. Additionally, one might ask students in four-year institutions and graduate programs about the impact other students in their classes have had on their learning or about their perceptions of the cultural relevance of their educational experiences.

Finally, the participants in this study who were from different races, cultures, and countries, were asked about the cultural relevance of their college classroom experience. For the most part, they indicated that they expected to be taught from the perspective of the dominant culture in the United States and

expected to adapt to its ways. It could be speculated that since they were business majors this attitude might stem from their desire to become employed in American businesses and they know that to fit in and to be successful they need to adapt. Further research could be conducted to explore this issue of cultural relevance in the college classroom with students of different majors. In addition, this study does not include any students who may have become discouraged because of lack of cultural relevance and who may have dropped out of higher education because of it. Research could be conducted to shed light on this issue as well. Furthermore, since cultural relevance was only a part of this study, this line of inquiry could be expanded to a larger population of students. This could be extended through both qualitative and quantitative methods. Although qualitative research provides greater depth and richness of findings, a well constructed quantitative study could be conducted to reach a larger population of diverse students to gain additional information about their views of the cultural relevance of their college classroom experiences.

#### Final Reflections

During my nearly 40 years as an educator, I have devoted a great deal of time reflecting on what is the best way to teach. I have questioned what are the best techniques and activities to use in the classroom to ensure my students' academic success. Each day, as I leave the classroom, I reflect on what seemed to be effective and what could have been better. Even when I thought I knew the answer, I wondered if my students would agree. So, this project was truly a labor of love that allowed me to formally delve into the realm of teaching from the



perspective of adult students and learn what they say is important in their classroom learning environment. I finally have in the students' own words their opinions of how they learn best.

When I first learned to use interactive techniques such as group discussions and projects, my impressions were that students did not necessarily welcome this method of learning but that they tolerated those activities because they were not given a choice. Therefore, I was surprised at the findings in this study that indicated a resounding preference for a variety of interactive activities and that the students themselves claimed they learned more and remembered better when an interactive method of teaching was used.

Another surprise was the extent to which students recognized that they learned from the other students in the classroom. Even though I recognized the value of that learning, I did not realize that the students were aware of the value and the extent of that learning to them.

I was not surprised by the participants' desire for a caring instructor since I have received much feedback from students over the years commending me for caring about them and their learning. I feel blessed that I have the capacity to truly care about my students and their achievements. This part of teaching has not been difficult for me and has served me well in my relationship with students during the past four decades.

The findings in this study fill me with an eagerness to go into the classroom each day with the words of these participants ringing in my ears. I am eager to continue caring and to provide more and better activities of an interactive nature to allow more students to benefit from learning with and from other students.

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APPENDIX A  
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA SHEET

Name:

Address:

Phone No.:

E-mail Address:

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Colleges Attended (include dates of attendance):

Please check each of the following instructional methods that you have experienced:

- Lecture
- Whole class discussion
- Small group discussion
- Role play
- Debate
- In-class case study analysis
- Writing assignments such as term papers or written case studies
- Individual presentation by you in class
- Group presentation in class (in which you participated)
- Group project work
- Telecourse
- Web-enhanced course

## APPENDIX B

### INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Describe your three most significant learning experiences in college classes.

Explain the best learning experience you have had in college.

Why did you like that experience?

How did you learn from that experience?

Explain the worst learning experience you have had in college.

Describe your idea of the ideal college class.

Explain what kinds of instructional techniques you prefer.

Describe the best college teacher you have had.

Describe the worst college teacher you have had.

Explain how other students in your classes have influenced your learning.

Explain how your college classroom experiences have helped you learn by  
building on your past experiences?

Discuss how you feel about a classroom that is focused on the teacher rather  
than on the students.

Discuss how you feel about a classroom in which students are the primary focus.

Recall a particular lesson, topic, reading, or movie that particularly excited you.

Have you ever had readings in your classes specifically by or about people other  
than European-Americans? In general, what are your thoughts about the  
cultural sensitivity of the readings that you have had?

Can you describe a discussion in a class that seemed to attend to cultural issues either directly or indirectly in which you were particularly engaged?

Can you describe an experience where you either disagreed with comments made by either the teacher or other students about culture or when you felt that there might be some sort of cultural dimension going on that wasn't addressed? If so, how did you deal with that?

What are the ways that interacting at school is similar to and different from interacting in your own families, in terms of the type of language used or way of being in class? How, if at all, do you adjust your behavior or language when you are in the school setting?

Do you have any recommendations for how RACC (or the business division) might be more culturally responsive in the classroom?

Approval Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Social Science Institutional Review Board**

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH The Pennsylvania State University

**Title of Project:** Learning Preferences: A Qualitative Study of the Classroom Learning Preferences of a Diverse Group of Community College Students

**Principal**

**Investigator:** Sandra B. Kern, Adult Education Doctoral Student, Penn State Harrisburg, 950 Wayne Avenue, Wyomissing, PA 19610, e-mail: [skern@soulfood.org](mailto:skern@soulfood.org), 610-378-1616

**Dissertation**

**Advisor:** Elizabeth J. Tisdell, Associate Professor in Adult Education, Penn State Harrisburg, School of Behavioral Sciences and Education, W331 Olmsted Bldg., Middletown, PA 17057, e-mail: [ejt11@psu.edu](mailto:ejt11@psu.edu), 717-948-6640

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the learning preferences of adult community college students from diverse backgrounds and how they construct new meanings out of their educational experiences in the classroom.
2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview (60-90 minutes in length). You will be asked to participate in a focus group lasting approximately 1 hour. You may be asked for a follow-up interview, either in person or by telephone. You will be asked to review transcripts of the interview to verify information.
3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks or discomforts in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.
4. **Benefits:** You might find that discussing your classroom learning preferences is a rewarding experience. Also, the results of this research should assist adult educators and administrators to more effectively design programs and plan classroom activities for adult students.
5. **Duration/Time:** The length of the interview will be 60-90 minutes.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Only the principal investigator/interviewer will know your identity. Your identity will be kept confidential; and if this research is published or presented, no information will be provided that will identify you. Further, in order to protect your identity, all audio recordings and transcripts will be stored in a file cabinet in a locked office of the investigator and will be destroyed a year after completion of the study (March 2006). The investigator will transcribe the tapes and will be the only person to have access to them. The Office for Research Protections and the Social Science Institutional Review Board may review records related to this project. If focus group participants speak about the contents of the focus group outside the group, it is expected that they will not reveal to other people what individual participants said.
7. **Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about the research. Contact Sandra B. Kern at 610-378-1616 or by e-mail at [skern@soulfood.org](mailto:skern@soulfood.org) with questions. If you have questions about the rights of research participants, you can contact the Office for Research Protections at 814-865-1775.
7. **Compensation:** You will not be compensated for participating in this study.
8. **Voluntary Participation:** Participation is voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the principal investigator. You can decline to answer specific questions. You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below. You will be given a copy for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## VITA

### SANDRA B. KERN

Sandra Kern is completing her doctoral studies in Adult Education at the Pennsylvania State University—Harrisburg. She earned a bachelor's degree in Business Education from Bloomsburg State College and a master's degree in Counseling at the University of Delaware.

Sandra is a professor in the Business Division at Reading Area Community College as well as coordinator of the Business Management program. In these roles, she works closely with students in both an instructional and advisory capacity. Sandra is a member of Phi Delta Kappa and Pi Lambda Theta.