Beyond Learner-Centeredness: Close Encounters of the Systemocentric Kind

Douglas Reimondo Robertson
Eastern Kentucky University

An extensive analysis of the college teaching literature (over 350 items) suggests that the perspective of perhaps the most highly effective college teachers has yet to be conceptualized, at least within a comprehensive developmental framework. This paper articulates that perspective—called here Systemocentrism (or teacher/learner-centeredness). The perspective’s two distinctive elements—attention to teachers’ and learners’ inner experience and to the intersubjective systems that develop among teachers and learners—are described, then illustrated with examples from two domains—teachers’ emotionality and teachers’ transference. Consistently positive response from faculty and administrators regarding the concept’s validity and utility suggests that it provides faculty developers with a valuable new tool for instructional development activities.

I QUESTION THE SUPERIORITY of learner-centered teaching. That would make me favor teacher-centeredness, right? Wrong. I am not so much opposed to learner-centeredness as I am uncomfortable with its moral dominion over the conversation regarding good teaching, notwithstanding its incompleteness. Both an analysis of the college teaching literature (including over 350 items) and personal experience as a faculty member and faculty developer (29 years as a college and university teacher and 13 years as a faculty developer) strongly suggest to me that something exists beyond the common teacher-centered-versus-learner-centered framing of college teaching. For me, that “something” is expressed in a conceptual framework that includes a third teaching approach that is beyond, but includes, learner-centeredness as well as teacher-centeredness. I call this perspective Systemocentrism or teacher/learner-centeredness (Robertson, 1999a; also, Robertson, 1996, 1997, 1999b, 2000, 2001, in press-a, in press-b). However, despite the empirical evidence for this perspective—support that is embedded in the formal scholarly literature on college teaching and in the personal experience of some of our most effective teachers—you will not see Systemocentrism, by any name, described in extant typologies of professors-as-teachers (e.g., Adelson, 1962; Axelrod, 1973; Baker et al., 1990; Mann et al., 1970; Pratt & Associates, 1998) or developmental models of professors-as-teachers (e.g., Pratt, 1989; Ralph, 1978; Sherman et al., 1987). This newly conceptualized teaching perspective has been presented in a variety of fora besides scholarly publication, including faculty development workshops, conference plenary and concurrent sessions, and faculty and administrator consultations. Consistently, faculty and administrators alike have responded that the concept has value not only in understanding the full array of perspec-
tives that professors bring to bear on their work as teachers but also in seeing more completely the range of possibilities that exists for professors’ development as teachers (Robertson, in press-b). In the following discussion, Systemocentrism is briefly explained—first, its two essential elements, and second, some specific examples—with the hope that the reader will also find the concept useful in thinking about college teaching and its development.

Systemocentrism—Inner Experience and Intersubjective Systems

Development is a process of adding something, such as thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, to what was there already and, as that something is integrated, having the whole that it is joining, such as a perspective or frame of reference, be transformed (Robertson, 1988). Development is not a process of subtraction and substitution, as in subtracting an old perspective and substituting a new one. Systemocentrism (teacher/learner-centeredness) is a perspective that integrates, not replaces the developmentally previous perspectives of teacher- and learner-centeredness (Robertson, 1999a). Systemocentrism adds and integrates two, critical elements to the teacher- and learner-centered perspectives: (a) awareness of the teacher’s inner experience as a learning facilitator; and (b) attention to the complex, dynamic, intersubjective systems that develop from the interaction of the inner experiences of teachers and students. Each of these elements is discussed in their respective sections below.

Inner Experience

Key characteristics of learner-centered approaches include attention to the learning process and to the inner experience of the unique individuals who occupy the student roles—the primary interest being to facilitate this learning process in these unique individuals. Learner-centered approaches add and integrate these features with the basic interest in teacher expertise that typifies most teacher-centered approaches. In learner-centeredness, even though the teacher may still hold the responsibilities of being the master learner, attention focuses on helping learners to construct their own, high quality, personal knowledge. The shift is from teacher as knowledge disseminator to teacher as learning facilitator. Or as progressive education’s old adage put it, learner-centered teachers teach students not subject matter. Surely, this account of teacher-centeredness and learner-centeredness is not new to readers. However, what may be new is Systemocentrism’s addition and integration of a concern with the learning facilitation process and the inner experience of the unique individual who occupies the learning facilitator (teacher) role. When teaching is defined as facilitating learning, it becomes a helping profession, and the teacher/student relationship becomes a helping relationship—an educational helping relationship (Robertson, 1996, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001, in press-a, in press-b). Of course, the helper (teacher) must attend to the idiosyncratic, inner experience of the helpee (learner). However, helpers must also be aware of their own idiosyncratic experience as they attempt to help individual learners. For example, they must be aware of how they react when they meet learner resistance, when they get mad at learners, when they become sad from learners, when they fall in love with learners, when they despise learners, when they feel guilty, when they feel threatened, and so forth. Notwithstanding its critical importance, learner-centered approaches seem to neglect this dimension altogether (extraordinary accounts that serve to prove this point through their exception include Murphy, 1993; Palmer, 1998; Tobin, 1993; Tompkins, 1996). Learner-centeredness idealizes learning facilitators by neglecting their inner experience. In dramatic contrast, teacher/learner-centeredness (Systemocentrism) treats the learning facilitator as a fully human individual who occupies the learning facilitator role. In so doing, Systemocentrism joins other helping professions in acknowledging that helping professionals—in this case, educational helping professionals (teachers)—must both be aware of their personal experience as they perform their educational helping role and be able to manage that personal experience in order to optimize their effectiveness in that professional role.
Intersubjective Systems

Managing the educational helping relationship takes us to a second defining feature of Systemocentric teacher/learner-centeredness—a focus on complex, dynamic, intersubjective systems. In this dimension, learning ecologies, not just individuals, come to the foreground of teacher interest. These learning ecologies have many features. However, in Systemocentricism, of particular importance is the way in which the subjective realities of teachers and students interact to form relational systems. Systemocentric teachers attend to these relational systems and the systemic, subjective consequences of specific interactions and interventions. Managing the educational helping relationships that a course involves becomes an exercise in managing intersubjective systems. An existential, systemic perspective may characterize some learner-centered approaches (rarely teacher-centered approaches). However, learner-centered approaches typically leave a key element out of the system—viz., the inner experience of the learning facilitator (teacher). Developmentally, remember that these concerns with the inner experience of the teacher and with intersubjective systems are added to and integrated with attention to teacher-centeredness’s focus on teacher expertise and learner-centeredness’s concentration on the inner experience of the learners—again development involving adding and integrating not subtracting and substituting (Robertson, 1988).

Systemocentrism—Examples

In order to flesh out these skeletal descriptions of Systemocentrism, examples from two domains are discussed in the following sections: (a) teachers’ annoyance, fear, and guilt; and (b) teachers’ transference.

Teachers’ Annoyance, Fear, and Guilt

Tennant and Pogson (1995) report provocative, albeit informal, results from Tennant’s exercise focusing on evoking and exploring certain intra-psychic aspects of teachers’ work. Recently, I presented these findings to university faculty in four workshops and found that faculty readily identify with many of the responses and some faculty, particularly new, junior faculty, with nearly all of them. In the following section, selected findings (which are arbitrarily restricted to five in each category in order to limit the section’s length) are first reported in order to suggest these dimensions of emotionality in teaching (annoyances, fears, and guilt feelings). Then, the Systemocentric approach to these types of teacher emotionality is illustrated.

In the exercise, which was performed with a number of groups, Tennant asked experienced adult educators (female and male trainers, community workers, health educators, and basic educators) to respond to the following two questions:
1. Identify aspects of student/trainee/participant behavior that annoy or irritate you. Provide specific examples if possible.
2. Identify aspects of your role which you fear and/or feel guilty about. Once again, provide specific examples if possible (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 180).

Examples of teachers’ annoyances with students included the following:
- Indifference/apathy/lack of involvement...
- Racist/sextist comments...
- Not respecting the rights of others...
- Refusal to consider new ideas or to listen to others’ views
- Personality characteristics of some learners, such as arrogance, antisocial behavior, ingratiating behavior, or competitiveness (pp. 182-183).

Among teachers’ reported fears about their own role performance were the following:
- Not being able to answer questions
- Not fully understanding the subject matter...
- Inability to hold interest
- Losing one’s place, getting confused, going blank
- Not being able to complete the session (pp. 182-183).

Teachers’ behaviors that led to guilt feelings in them included the following:
- Not keeping a promise to the group
- Presenting information one knows to be of little worth...

Knowing what needs to be done but not doing it
(applies to the full gamut of things a teacher can do to prepare for a session)...  
- Losing control of the group  
- Losing control of oneself, becoming angry or irritated (pp. 182-183).

The inescapable conclusion that comes from these highly plausible and seemingly representative findings is that teaching is just as emotional an experience as is learning, which only makes sense because human beings are doing both (for a splendid discussion of the emotionality of learning, see Brookfield, 1990).

Teacher/learner-centeredness (Systemocentrism) recognizes the emotionality of both the teacher and the students and attempts to deal with it. Teacher-centeredness has teachers—in their role of master learners, or knowledge disseminators—focusing on their own experience, perhaps attending to their emotional life, but not to their students’. Learner-centeredness has teachers—in their role of learning facilitators (albeit naive ones)—attending to the students’ emotional life but not to their own. Teacher/learner-centeredness has teachers—in their role as fully human learning facilitator—attending to both their own and their students’ emotional life and the way in which they interact and influence each other. Systemocentric teachers attempt to avoid allowing annoyances, fears, and guilt feelings to go unnoticed because they understand that the feelings will reveal themselves and affect the teaching/learning ecology and the educational helping relationships with students whether or not the teacher is aware of them. For example, what do individual teachers do when they feel guilty about not preparing adequately for class? Do they talk excessively in lieu of a well-prepared active learning plan? Do they skate quickly over difficult material implying that it is easy because they themselves barely understand it? Do they blame somebody, something, or some circumstance, in class? Further, what are the effects on the classroom environment and on their relationships with students from the way in which the teachers express their guilt feelings? Do students disengage from the material in reaction to professors’ excessive talking? Does the teachers’ guilt shift to anger at the students’ disengagement? Do the students feel stupid from their inability to understand the material explained by professors who barely understand it themselves? Do the students’ feelings of inadequacy morph to anger at the professors whom the students perceive to be stimulating their feelings of stupidity? In Systemocentrism, professors-as-teachers give their rigorous, routine attention to these kinds of questions because the queries involve so centrally the teaching/learning realities that Systemocentric professors create and inhabit.

**Teacher Transference**

Transference is an unconscious displacement of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from a previous significant relationship onto a current relationship, and teachers and students manifest transference regularly in their relationships, whether or not either teachers or students are aware of these enactments (e.g., see Britzman & Pitt, 1996; Brooke, 1987; Culley, Diamond, Edwards, Lennox, & Portuges, 1985; Daloz, 1985; Davis, 1987; Felman, 1987; Finkel & Arney, 1995; Frank, 1995; Heinrich, 1995; Jacobs, 1991; Jay, 1987; Kurpius, Gibson, Lewis, & Corbet, 1991; McCready, 1985; McGee, 1987; Moi, 1992; Murphy A. 1989; Murphy, C., 1989; Penley, 1989; Robertson, D., 1993, 1999b; Robertson, J., 1995; Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry, & Osborne, 1983; Scheman, 1995; Schleifer, 1987; Simon, 1995; Tobin, 1993). Two examples of teacher transference—one from my practice as a faculty developer, and one from the college teaching literature—provide useful grounding for illustrating Systemocentrism (or teacher/learner-centeredness).

**Race, class, and gender transference.** Meeting once a week over the course of two semesters, I provided instructional consultation for a brilliant mathematician who was in despair about the low quality of his classroom environment and his high student drop rate. A variety of factors were in play, and as our work deepened, he revealed more and more about the unique person that he was as he tried to fulfill his teacher role. In this process, he described clear transference enactments that anchored themselves in his experience of growing up in Hawaii in a working-class, Japanese-American family. He disclosed that, without realizing it, he often associates Whites, especially males, with authority and privilege. He said that frequently he has two or three White...
males in class that evoke these childhood associations and that dominate his attention. He feels uneasy in their presence, and he is hyper-reactive to them. After it is too late, he realizes that his over-reactions have affected the classroom environment negatively for other students. His responses to these students surprise and puzzle him, seeming to sneak up on him and confuse him with their irrational strength. He feels badly for having the reactions, and he tends to treat them as a problem that needs eliminating rather than as a predictable human response that needs managing. "I shouldn't feel that way," he chastises himself, to no avail it appears. To the best of my knowledge, he is not aware that students might also be acting from their own deep associations.

In Systemocentrism, professors expect to manifest transference (although they may not use this term) just as students do—transference being a perfectly normal and common human behavior and teachers being human beings just as students are. As a matter of practice, Systemocentric professors remain vigilant for transference enactments in themselves and in their students. They attempt to move their unconscious associations to consciousness as soon as possible in order to manage them effectively. They are particularly sensitive to the effect that their own transference has on the group as well as on the individual student. In teacher-centeredness, professors are wrapped up in their own experience as master learners and as performers, and they are not connected to students' experience in any way more than as a general approximation or as a projection of their own experience. In learner-centeredness, professors as learning facilitators (rather than as knowledge disseminators) are at the early stages of being a helping professional. Because they are focusing on their learners' inner experience but not yet on their own as a learning facilitator, they may be sensitive to transference in their students toward them but not mindful of their own transference toward students. In Systemocentrism (teacher/learner-centeredness), they attempt to be aware of transference in both themselves and in students, as well as to perceive the interactive effects of these enactments on the group. The professor in the case above seems to be a teacher-centered professor who illustrates the egocentrism of teacher-centeredness but also—with his eventual awareness of the intersubjective impact of his transference enactment on the class—the fact that essential elements of Systemocentrism may appear and develop toward ascendancy in perspectives prior to full-blown Systemocentrism.

Age-stage transference. The second case of teacher transference is taken from the college teaching literature and comes from what appears to be a teacher/learner-centered (Systemocentric) professor's approach to teacher transference in contrast to the teacher-centered perspective exemplified above. In this frank account, we see how certain young male students—with their baseball caps, dark glasses, and untied shoelaces—arouse a male composition teacher's unresolved conflicts regarding his own adolescence (Tobin, 1993):

Finally, one day, I snapped. I walked into class, saw them together, laughing and leaning against the wall, and in a voice that conveyed much too much anger and disgust I said, "I have never had to do this is tens years of college teaching; in fact, I left high school specifically so I wouldn't have to deal with shit like this, but you guys are completely out of control. I don't want you to sit together any more." .... It was an embarrassing moment because it was clear—to them and to me—that I was the one who felt out of control. What was going on? .... Clearly this had as much or more to do with my insecurities and unconscious responses as it did with theirs. .... That's when I realized the significance of my slip about high school. I had meant to say, "That's why I left high school teaching," but I had referred accidentally to my own experience as a high school student. I remembered periods when I acted like these students and later periods when they were the type I felt I was competing with. And I realized how much, for whatever reasons, I was still bothered by the group behavior of adolescent males. The realization helped: by recognizing and somehow naming the source of my anger, it dissipated and became more manageable. I'm not saying I suddenly felt comfortable with these students or with their texts, but the situation now seemed within my own realm, somehow within my control. Although this example may have more to do with my own neuroses than with composition theory, the point is that this knowledge changed the way I read these students and their texts; it helped me in my teaching and, indirectly, helped these students in their writing (pp. 34-35).
In the full text that surrounds this excerpt, the professor is clearly attentive to both the inner experience of his students and of himself, as well as the way in which these inner experiences interact to create the class’s intersubjective system. These elements are hallmarks of the Systemocentric perspective. Regarding transference and the professor’s inner experience in general, he “cultivates a receptive attitude” and “exercises active awareness” (Robertson, 1999b, pp. 161-162). Rather than being surprised and slow to understand his transference, as a teacher-centered or a learner-centered professor might be, he is alert to it and properly interprets its manifestation quickly. Furthermore, he anticipates that his enactment has affected the group and the individuals negatively, and he takes steps to check the impact and to manage it immediately. Seeing teaching Systemocentrically does not mean eliminating problems; its means anticipating and managing them more effectively.

**Conclusion**

Rest assured, even on my worst days, that I do not view students as aliens, notwithstanding the reference in my subtitle to Hynek’s classification system for alien encounters (Hynek, 1972). However, I do think that good teaching normally requires effective communication among beings with extraordinarily different and diverse perspectives and that the metaphor of Hynek’s close encounters of the fifth kind (not just contact between human beings and aliens but direct communication between them; Hynek, 1972) suggests the teaching perspective that I am describing here—viz., Systemocentrism, or teacher/learner-centeredness. In this perspective—which is part of a comprehensive developmental model (Robertson, 1999a)—the subjective realities of these diverse beings (teachers and students) and the way in which they interact to form intersubjective systems join in importance the fundamental concern that all college teachers must have with their subject expertise. The resulting perspective appears to be the most promising with regard to optimizing educational ecologies for diverse students and their learning and therefore seems to provide an invaluable agenda for instructional development.

**References**


Douglas Reimondo Robertson is a Professor of Educational Leadership and Geography and founding Director of the Teaching and Learning Center at Eastern Kentucky University.

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