

Shifting the Focus: A Study of Student-Centered Learning in Modern Education

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the world of education and the methodologies surrounding it by asking students and professors for their opinions on how they perceive academia and the best ways to teach and learn. It focuses on the role of alternative approaches, specifically Student-Centered Learning (SCL), to assess whether implementing these methods in universities would be beneficial. SCL proposes a shift in roles, with the professor transitioning from a "sage on the stage" to a "guide on the side". This research explores university teaching methods through online surveys and interviews with students and professors, aiming to understand their opinions on SCL. The goal is to understand if students obtain what they want and need through their academic journey. It also looks at professors' understanding of their roles within this context. The primary focus of this thesis is SCL, seeking to demystify students' understanding and their experience with this teaching approach to understand if it should be implemented more frequently in undergraduate university programs. By examining dropout rates, students' biggest challenges, key transferable skills needed for success, readiness for higher education, and more, this thesis provides a holistic understanding of what students like and dislike about the university and offers suggestions for the potential improvement of academia. This research reveals that half of students are ill-prepared for university. Furthermore, it emphasizes that flexibility is key to enhancing student success rates. Many participants in this study regard SCL as an effective approach to providing the adaptability necessary for improved academic outcomes.

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This paper was written on unceded Indigenous lands in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal. I recognize the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation and all other First Nations, Indigenous and other peoples who gather here as the custodians of the lands and waters on which Concordia University stands.

1. Introduction

Education is a concept everyone has heard of multiple times in their lives. Everyone on earth has undergone a form of education to a given extent. It may come in many forms and from various sources, such as family, friends, teachers, online platforms, and so on. However, when most of us think of education, we think of schools. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, education is described as "the process of teaching or learning, especially in a school or college, or the knowledge that you get from this"(Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). But what does this really mean? While we understand that education revolves around the transfer of knowledge, we rarely stop to question how this transfer occurs. Moreover, we rarely ask ourselves: What is teaching? What do we teach? For what purpose? We often teach what we consider important for society's functioning. However, education has proven to hold a dark and destructive history, such as seen in the case of the Canadian Indigenous residential school system. Education can indeed be a weapon of mass destruction such as in the case of the ethnic cleansing of First Nations in Canada (Bombay, Matheson, Anisman, 2014). Consequently, we must ask ourselves very important questions: What is the role of education today? How should it be approached, by whom, and for what purpose?

Education has the potential to change the world. In Canada, it has been a cornerstone of daily life since the country's early stages (Gaffield & Millette, 2015). Over time, education, and how we historically understand it, has undergone significant changes and reforms in Canada (Bruno-Jofré, 2014). From the earlier stages where education was governed by religious entities (Boudreau, 2011) to a now laic and globalized approach to education (Larsen, M. A., 2016). It is generally regarded as an essential part of individual development, yet a notable percentage of Canadians still fall through the cracks.

Dropout rates in Canada have steadily decreased since the 1990s, dropping from 16.6% to 9.3% between 1990 and 2006 (StatsCan, 2015). By 2020, 89% of Canadians graduated high school within seven years (StatsCan, 2022). However, a substantial portion of the population still drops out before obtaining a high school diploma. This thesis aims to explore how education is perceived by university students and how we may address the dropout rates with viable solutions such as alternative approaches to education.



(Digital Commonwealth, 2024)



(Sanchez Manning, 2013)

Taken 100 years apart, these images depict a similar scene, a professor, in front of a class, writing on a board, with students passively observing the presentation. Their goal is to memorize core concepts to reiterate them onto a piece of paper which will determine their eligibility to get into a specific field later in life. While this is an oversimplification of reality, it is true that how we teach knowledge has not changed drastically. While there have been reforms such as the removal of religious control there remains a significant need for change within our educational system.

My journey through education has been anything but straightforward. This path was marked by multiple experiences that fueled my desire to investigate the issues within the world of academia and the educational system. At 15, I dropped out of high school for a few years after being placed in a group home, only to return a few years later and complete my studies in the adult high school system. Eventually, I ended up enrolling in CEGEP. Despite this renewed effort, I dropped out again after two years. There were many reasons for these decisions, but at the heart of it, I found school to be boring. This sentiment isn't unique to me; many of my friends and colleagues found themselves simply surviving through high school and CEGEP because that was what their parents wanted them to do. Many of them were bored and had little to no interest in what they were learning. This is not something that only my surroundings and I have experienced, Sir Ken Robinson dives deeply into this understanding of education and how it discourages creativity in his Ted Talk "Do schools kill creativity" (Robinson, 2006).

However, throughout my academic journey, I also encountered classes that sparked my interest and left me wanting to know more. The difference between being bored or highly motivated often lies in the teaching approach. Some classes followed the traditional model: notetaking, lectures, and minimal interaction. Others encouraged group discussions, class

activities, and offered flexibility in exploring topics of personal interest. These experiences, especially at the graduate level, made me realize that an alternative approach to education could transform the academic experience for many students. This leads me to my research question: How can alternative educational structures, such as Student-Centered Learning (SCL), address the diverse needs of students and reduce dropout rates while maintaining academic rigour, compared to traditional teaching methods?

Additionally, dropout rates became a critical concern for me, as well as for many cities, provinces, and countries. While these rates fluctuate across Quebec and vary significantly depending on socio-economic factors, I noticed a troubling pattern among young men in my community dropping out at a very early age. The current high school graduation rate within the first 7 years of high school in Quebec stood at 83% in 2020 (Stat Can, 2022), a statistic that cannot be ignored. I believe that offering a more flexible, engaging academic structure could address this issue by making education more interactive and, ultimately, more enjoyable.

Beyond my personal experience, there's a larger societal issue at play. The world has changed drastically over the last few decades, with young people today being exposed to unprecedented levels of stimulation, whether through the internet, social media, or entertainment. Despite these changes, the structure of education has remained largely static, with real shifts only appearing at the higher levels of academia. This raises critical questions: Why hasn't education evolved more significantly to meet the needs of contemporary society? Shouldn't we adapt the way we teach to better reflect the world our students live in?

I argue that a reimagined, more adapted educational system is necessary across all levels of learning. While I would have liked to conduct my research with high school students, I realized that they may not have yet experienced alternative educational structures. As a result, I

chose to focus on university students at Concordia, aiming to understand what keeps students motivated and whether alternative approaches, such as Student-Centered Learning (SCL), could help reduce dropout rates and enhance educational outcomes.

Alternative education models, such as the Waldorf education structure, which has been adopted by several schools, including some in Montréal, offer inspiring examples of how student-centred approaches can enhance and enrich the learning experience. Research by scholars like Wheatley and Din, as well as Bremner, Cameron, and Sakata, highlights how these models support deeper student engagement and meaningful learning (Din and Wheatley, 2007) (Bremner, Sakata, and Cameron, 2022). These examples have encouraged me to reflect on the role that SCL can play in creating more dynamic and student-responsive educational environments.

As a graduate student at Concordia University who values student perspectives and their understanding of their academic journeys, my objective is to examine students' perceptions of their performance rather than relying on formal evaluations. This research draws on self-reported data concerning perceived skill development, academic achievement, and other relevant indicators. By prioritizing self-assessments over official transcripts or institutional records, the study captures students' interpretations of their academic experiences. This approach not only provides valuable insight into students' self-perceptions but also aligns with Concordia University's ethical guidelines and facilitates more practical data collection for this type of research.

At its core, my thesis seeks to explore the pros and cons of Student-Centered Learning, based on feedback from both students and educators and compare this approach with traditional teaching methods. Can SCL make education more engaging and better

suited to our current societal needs? Can it help reduce dropout rates and foster a more profound, meaningful learning experience? These are the questions I aim to address through my research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The following section introduces the theoretical framework, setting the stage for the literature review. It establishes the foundation upon which the review is built, beginning with earlier sources and progressing to more contemporary scholars.

My research seeks to explore the perspectives of both students and professors on education, as well as understand their perception of the matter. To guide my literature review and the concepts explored in this research project, I have chosen constructivism as the primary theoretical framework, grounded more precisely in Jean Piaget's theory. Constructivism posits that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals through their experiences and social interactions, rather than being passively absorbed. Piaget's work on cognitive development underscores the dynamic nature of learning as a process of knowledge construction. Additionally, I have incorporated David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which emphasizes learning through experience and reflection. ELT highlights the significance of concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation in the learning process. I selected both Constructivism and ELT as they align closely with the principles of Student-Centered Learning. The following sections provide further explanation of these two theories, beginning with the foundational works of Piaget and Kolb, followed by more contemporary scholars who have expanded on these concepts.

2.1a Constructivism

In Piaget's discussions on the socialization of individual intelligence (Piaget, 1950, p.173–179), he highlights the importance of social interaction in the development of logical thinking and intellectual cooperation. He emphasizes that ‘[a]s far as intelligence is concerned, co-operation is thus an objectively conducted discussion (out of which arises an internalized discussion, i.e. deliberation or reflection), collaboration in work, exchange of ideas, mutual control (the origin of the need for verification and demonstration), etc. It is therefore clear that co-operation is the first of a series of forms of behaviour which are important for the constitution and development of logic.’ (Piaget, 1950, p.178). In other words, cooperative learning environments, where students work together, allow for the organization of thoughts, which is fundamental to obtaining an in-depth learning experience. This aligns with the principles of SCL, where collaboration is encouraged to provide deeper understanding and stronger knowledge creation. Piaget's argument thus suggests that without social interaction, individual cognitive development could stagnate, limiting the opportunities for students to refine their intellectual processes.

Similarly, Piaget's examination of Egocentricity and Development explains how young children interpret information from their own perspectives and gradually learn to decentralize through interactions with others. He argues that ‘[i]n order to construct a space, a time, a universe of causes and of sensori-motor or practical objects, the child has had to free himself from his perceptual and motor egocentricity; by a series of successive decentralisations he has managed to organise an empirical group of physical displacements, by localising his own body and his own movements amid the whole mass of others.’ (Piaget, 1950, p.134-135). This process highlights an important part of SCL, which focuses on balancing the learning experience for each

student and encouraging them to take charge of their education alongside classmates. As students engage with their peers and professors, they move from a self-centered perspective to a more complex understanding, like the decentralization process Piaget describes.

In Student-Centered environments, learners are not passive recipients of information but are actively involved in constructing their understanding, guided by their prior knowledge and new experiences. Piaget's notions of Assimilation and Accommodation further reinforce this framework. He discusses how "[...] when schemata are co-ordinated with one another as means and ends, the child is no longer limited to applying known means to new situations; he differentiates the schemata serving as means by a sort of tertiary circular reaction and comes in consequence to discover new means." (Piaget, 1950, p.115). In other words, an individual learns from trial and error based on previous understanding of the world and new experiences with the interaction between what is known and what is experienced. This adaptability shows how structures and knowledge interact with one another, such as in SCL, where students are encouraged to explore, experiment, and reshape their understanding based on new information.

Although Piaget's theory primarily focuses on younger individuals, it still offers valuable insights into the application of constructivism and its related theories, which can extend to later stages of life, such as in the context of university students. Education helps students move beyond their existing belief structures and develop new ones that transcend their personal experiences. In university settings, students reconstruct their identities and ideas by engaging with both the material presented in class and their peers. This process requires a supportive environment that encourages collaboration, allowing for the decentralization of internalized ideas through trial and error, which fosters the emergence of new knowledge. While Piaget's theories are foundational, they can be considered somewhat dated given they were published over 70

years from now. To better understand how constructivism connects with SCL, contemporary scholars like Kate O'Connor have built upon and expanded the concept.

In his article, *Constructivism Learning Theory: A Paradigm for Students' Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Problem Solving to Affect Academic Performance in Higher Education*, Dr. Mohammed Abdullatif Almulla examines whether creativity and critical thinking help students solve problems and improve their academic performance. He does so by mediating the link between 21st-century skills, such as learning motivation, cooperativity, peer interaction, peer engagement, and a smart classroom environment (Almulla, 2023, p. 1).

Dr. Almulla explores how constructivism as a learning theory can foster critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities, ultimately enhancing students' academic performance. The study, involving 297 graduate and undergraduate students from King Faisal University, revealed a significant correlation between the implementation of constructivist methods and the development of critical thinking and creativity. Dr. Almulla argues that “lecturers should consider students’ learning motivation, cooperativity, peer interaction, and peer engagement in the smart classroom setting in order to encourage critical thinking and creativity” (Almulla, 2023, p. 17).

The article highlights that integrating constructivist learning theory with a focus on 21st-century skills can significantly boost students' problem-solving and cognitive abilities, as well as improve overall academic performance. This aligns with the broader theme of the research, which addresses the evolving needs and expectations of students in relation to academic achievement. The study also highlights the importance of cooperation, peer interaction, and an effective classroom environment, key aspects of SCL, in fostering critical thinking and creativity.

2.1b Experiential Learning

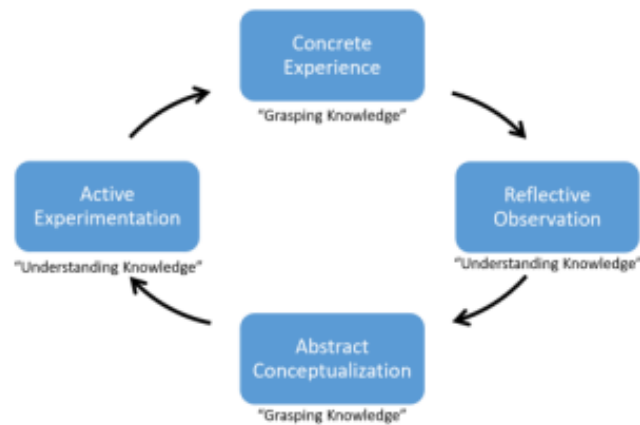
While Constructivism plays a significant role in Student-Centered Learning, it is also crucial to discuss David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. This theory emphasizes learning through experience and reflection, highlighting the importance of concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In essence, it posits that for learners to fully absorb knowledge, they must interact with it, engage in hands-on activities, and experiment with the material to truly grasp the concept, idea, or object at hand. Student-Centered Learning, which emphasizes hands-on activities and group work, aligns well with this framework and can help analyze how experiential learning impacts student engagement and knowledge retention.

Experiential Learning Theory is structured around three main models of the learning process. The first is the Lewinian model of Action Research and Laboratory Training, which uses cycles of planning, acting, and reflecting to enhance practices through collaborative research and hands-on learning (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). The second is Dewey's Model of Learning, which focuses on learning through continued experience, emphasizing active problem-solving and reflection to connect education with real-life situations (Kolb, 1984, p. 22). The third is Piaget's Model of Learning and Cognitive Development, which describes how children develop their thinking skills through stages: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational, each representing a different level of understanding and reasoning (Kolb, 1984, pp. 23-25).

Kolb himself notes, "There is a great deal of similarity among the models of the learning process discussed above. Taken together, they form a unique perspective on learning and development, a perspective that can be characterized by the following propositions, which are shared by the three major traditions of experiential learning" (Kolb, 1984, pp. 25-26). By

bringing together these three models, Kolb highlights a more complete, well-rounded approach to learning. It helps us understand how learners move from hands-on experiences to deeper, abstract thinking through reflection. The experiential learning cycle (acting, reflecting, thinking, and experimenting) blends all three models, creating a learning process that's not only more connected and flexible but also better suited to individual growth. This same approach is observed in SCL methodology.

Recent studies on Experiential Learning further demonstrate how these methods are effective in preparing students for our “Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous” (VUCA), offering versatility and applicability in both academic and non-academic settings. In their article *“Using Experiential Learning Theory to Improve Teaching and Learning in Higher Education”* Leong Y. Jonathan and Ma Nang Laik “describe the application and framework of experiential learning, in order to simulate a VUCA environment, in two contexts within a higher education institute; firstly, as part of an academic course, and secondly as a crafted, credit-bearing overseas learning experience.” (Jonathan and Laik, 2021, p.118) They do so with the use of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, a four-stage process where learners engage in a direct experience, reflect on it, conceptualize new ideas, and apply them in practice, forming a continuous loop of learning. This cycle emphasizes understanding and integrating knowledge, considering complex situational factors, and encouraging self-discovery, mindfulness, and adaptability. Unlike repetitive drilling, which focuses on trial-and-error and direct instruction, Kolb’s cycle adapts to various learning styles and promotes active experimentation and reflective observation. (Jonathan and Laik, 2021, p. 119-120).



(Schenck, J., & Cruickshank, J., 2015)

Their findings indicate how in contemporary times, experiential learning theory is a useful tool in terms of theoretical framework in “cultivating both appropriate learning perspectives and inculcating habits that will benefit the students in the emerging VUCA environment. It has also been shown to be equally applicable in academic and non-academic activities, for the development of undergraduate students. While there are limitations to the method, we believe that the observations made in this study show that the ELT framework, when applied in appropriate fashion, is far more versatile than that of conventional teaching methods today.” (Ibid., p.130)

Kolb argues that learning should be viewed as a process rather than an outcome. This perspective challenges the notion that learning is merely about accumulating facts or changing behaviours. Instead, it sees learning as a dynamic process where our understanding evolves through continuous experiences and adaptation (Kolb, 1984, p. 27). This also aligns with Jonathan and Laik understanding of the use of ELT in academia in recent times. These conceptualizations of learning align perfectly with the principles of Student-Centered Learning and provide the theoretical framework for analyzing the data collected in my research project.

SCL promotes personal growth rather than uniformity and encourages cross-disciplinary learning by enabling students to learn how to learn through various experiences and approaches. This makes it a valuable framework for envisioning the future of education.

2.2 Brief History

To better understand Student-Centered Learning it is important to understand its origin. SCL is not a recent concept. Critiques of education have been present for well over a century (G. O'Neill, 2005, p. 31). However, in recent times, various criticisms have been directed at the educational system. These critiques range from educational reforms, such as those witnessed in Quebec during the 1990s and 2000s (Potvin & Dionne, 2007), to the secularization of schools during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and 70s. Education is a topic that society has consistently questioned in terms of its structure and role.

In recent years, we have observed a gradual deterioration in education and its structure due to several factors, including a shortage of qualified teachers, insufficient funding and resources in the public education programs, and the influence of various societal factors such as drop-out rates, economic inflation and so on (Plourde, 2022).

Consequently, there is a compelling need for education reform. While education reforms have aimed to direct students' focus toward what is deemed necessary in society, particularly in the context and interests of capitalism, there remains a significant number of individuals who fall through the cracks of education. This is because they found it to be boring, irrelevant, or too challenging to complete. Students who did not complete high school on time (without extensions) in Canada ranged from 20% to 16% from 2016 to 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2022). However, "the increased on-time graduation rate may be associated with provincial and territorial education policies implemented during the pandemic to ensure students would not fail

or drop out of school given the pressures of school closures.” (Ibid.) In other words, while the dropout rates of high schoolers have been reducing over the past few years, that does not mean that this was due to a higher level of motivation from students. On the contrary, this reduction was caused by the passing expectations which were reduced during the pandemic. (Ibid.)

Furthermore, the current educational structure is increasingly oriented toward meeting the economic needs of society rather than addressing the individual needs of students. Additionally, the challenges posed by global climate change and the scarcity of jobs due to advancements in the artificial intelligence industry and the automation of robotics brings us to the question of whether we should continue with our current educational system.

2.3 Student-Centered Learning

Student-Centered Learning is an approach to pedagogy that emphasizes the role of students in the classroom. While this concept is not attributed to any one scholar in particular, it is commonly associated with John Dewey, who emphasized experiential learning and the importance of student interests. In their analysis of “*The Student-Centered Learning Model in John Dewey’s Progressive Conception*,” Elena Ancuta Santi and Gabriel Gorghiu explore the topic of Student-Centered Learning, emphasizing the role of placing students at the heart of their educational approach. (Santi & Gorghiu, p. 77, 2017)

In contrast to the classical approach commonly found in academia, Dewey’s method focuses on students' motivation, interests, and skills in order to maximize their potential (Ibid.). This presents a shift from the teacher-centered approaches previously observed in education. As noted in their article, “The period of traditional didactics (from the 17th century to the 19th century) was dominated by a magistrocentrism vision (Cristea, 1998), where the teacher’s role

was emphasized in the didactic approach, effectively centering on teaching” (Santi & Gorghiu, 2017, p. 80).

While this teacher-centered approach is the most commonly observed in academia, Dewey believed that it would be more beneficial for students' development and knowledge acquisition to actively participate in their learning experiences through problem-solving activities, rather than passively registering information from a professor (Santi & Gorghiu, 2017 p. 84-85). Following the same idea expressed by Santi and Gorghiu, “Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing” (Flanagan, 1994).

In other words, by adopting an educational approach that motivates students and encourages their curiosity, individuals will naturally reconstruct their understanding of the world through experiences, allowing for a deeper comprehension of both the world and the knowledge they construct within it.

The role of the teacher does not cease to exist; instead, it shifts from being the "sage on the stage" to a "guide on the side," as argued in Alison King's article (King, 1993). This change suggests that a shift in teaching philosophy and methodology is needed to encourage students' engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration in their learning experiences. It redefines the idea that the teacher is the sole source of information and instead places the student at the center of their learning, turning the professor into a facilitator (Ibid.).

This can be achieved through cooperative learning, which encourages students to learn from one another's experiences and understanding of a given topic. For example, students can be placed in groups of four and given a specific task on which they will become experts by

conducting their own research. Afterward, all groups can be rearranged so that each student joins a new group with different participants. Each student then becomes an expert on their topic and teaches their three new classmates about the knowledge they have acquired. This approach not only teaches students to conduct their own research but also helps them develop social skills and oral presentation abilities (King, 1993, p. 34).

The previous example also allows students to develop critical thinking, teamwork, and lifelong learning skills, as it provides “the opportunity to study elements of his or her sphere of interest that support his or her intrinsic motivation and contribute to the enrichment of their experience” (Santi & Gorghiu, p. 83, 2017).

Along this same idea, Brooks and Brooks (1999) stress that many educators argue that the best way to learn is by having students construct their own knowledge instead of having someone construct it for them. This ties back to Piaget's constructivism theory. Students learn best when they are able to relate what they learn in the classroom to the immediate environment and create meaning from different experiences. (Zain, Rasidi, Abidin, 2012, p.324)

However, while this structure can be quite beneficial for students' journeys through academia, it does come with certain challenges. It is important to note that while this approach benefits students' learning, it also requires a shift in the teacher's philosophy and methodology (Santi & Gorghiu, p. 77, 2017). This is no easy task. Professors are currently overwhelmed with larger classes, increasing challenges, and fewer resources year after year, especially in the aftermath of Covid-19 (Klusmann, A.L., 2023). This will also be addressed in the following section where the pros and cons of alternative approaches to education will be discussed further.

Another study looking into the benefits of alternative learning is titled "Peer Learning for University Students' Learning Enrichment: Perspectives of Undergraduate Students" by Zuochen Zhang and Jonathan G. Bayley from the University of Windsor examines the role of peer learning in enhancing the educational experience of undergraduate students. Peer learning, a form of collaborative learning where students engage with and learn from each other, is positioned as a complementary method to traditional teaching approaches. The study explores how peer learning fosters academic development, improves understanding of course materials, and enhances communication and teamwork skills among students (Zhang and Bayley, 2019). Zhang and Bayley conducted interviews and surveys with undergraduate students to better understand their perspectives on peer learning, analyzing both its benefits and challenges. Students reported that peer learning created a more interactive and supportive learning environment, encouraged deeper engagement with the content, and built a sense of community. However, the study also highlighted challenges such as unequal participation among group members and the potential for misunderstandings when students teach one another.

Overall, the paper argues that while peer learning offers significant potential for enriching university education, its success depends on structured facilitation and guidance from instructors. The study suggests that incorporating peer learning into university curricula can help develop critical thinking and collaboration skills, ultimately contributing to a more well-rounded educational experience.

With all this in mind, it is important to dive deeper into the possibility of alternative approaches to education to see if SCL is a viable alternative to the current educational structure and if it could potentially help reduce dropout rates in Quebec. However, for this change to

occur, more resources will need to be invested in training professors in this new methodology, as well as providing additional support for their current challenges.

2.3a Advantages of SCL

While many have addressed the pros and cons of SCL and alternative approaches to education, a recent article written by Sheeba Sardar Ali in 2019, titled "*Problem-Based Learning: A Student-Centered Approach*," summarizes appropriately the main pros and cons of such an approach. In her article, Ali examines how alternative approaches have real-world relevance, especially when using methodologies such as problem-based learning (PBL), which employs real-world examples to teach both theories and their practical applications. This approach motivates students not only by helping them learn new information but also by enabling them to understand how this knowledge can be applied in real life, making learning more tangible (Ali, 2019, p. 73).

Additionally, this approach encourages critical thinking alongside problem-solving. Rather than focusing solely on how a theory works, students are encouraged to make connections between it and other examples found in the real world. This motivates students to look beyond what they learn and ties the knowledge to other spheres of their lives (Ibid.). Furthermore, methodologies such as SCL or PBL promote group projects and class presentations, which develop collaboration and communication skills. "Students in PBL classrooms improve their social skills as they have more opportunities to practice using the language for authentic communication" (Ibid.). These approaches also encourage self-directed learning by allowing students to choose their topics and directions, helping them address the theories seen in class (Ibid.).

Finally, approaches such as SCL and PBL keep students engaged and motivated. This is a key reason why alternative approaches should be considered in education. By enhancing self-directed learning and enabling students to gain a deep understanding of the material while applying it to real-world examples, these approaches make education, and the knowledge obtained, more founded in concrete real-life examples instead of being more abstract. (Ali, 2019, p. 77).

2.3b Challenges of SCL

While alternative approaches in education have many benefits, there are also limitations. The first limitation Ali discusses is how "PBL can be difficult to implement in a traditional classroom setting if students and teachers [struggle with] understanding active or meaningful [learning]" (Ali, 2019, p. 73). This difficulty arises from the widespread use of traditional approaches to education, which would require a paradigm shift from the traditional to an alternative approach.

Furthermore, SCL and PBL would require teachers to be trained in these specific methods. Teachers would need to design questions, provide supporting materials, and continuously monitor and take notes on students' progress (Ali, 2019, p. 77). While these are skills professors already possess, it would require a certain openness and additional training to successfully implement these new methods.

Additionally, approaches such as PBL may be more challenging for certain students. "PBL is considered a constructive approach because essential components are feedback and reflection on the learning process. Students work as active agents in the construction of social knowledge" (Ibid.). This implies that students who primarily learn through memorization may face greater challenges when required to connect the knowledge learned to the world around

them. Additionally, just as some students prefer memorization over deep understanding, some may prefer working alone rather than in groups. Group discussions are a key component of alternative approaches to education, making it difficult for some students to adapt to these methods, especially "when teachers are unable to facilitate group discussions [...] and guide students through the problem-solving process" (Ali, 2019, p. 74).

Finally, these approaches can be time-consuming. This is because some students may lack the maturity to understand certain problems. Ali discusses how some "students are not able to understand the idea of open-ended problems" (Ali, 2019, p. 77). The fact that some may advance at a faster rate than others can force the group to take more time for those who are struggling, making the class more inclusive for everyone but also limiting students who grasp the material more easily.

In conclusion, while alternative approaches to education have proven beneficial in many cases, as highlighted above, it is important to also acknowledge and understand the limitations they present. Striking a balance between the advantages and challenges of these methods and adapting them to fit diverse learning environments and student needs, will be crucial for the continued evolution of education.

2.4 Essential Skills for University.

Graduates should leave higher education better in many ways than when they entered it, and this improvement should be attributable to the undergraduate curriculum, rather than to the fact they are simply three or four years older (Knight, 2001). They need to be equipped with skills that they can use to 'sell themselves' to employers. (Washer, 2007)

A central author who has explored the key skills needed for higher education is Peter Washer, who wrote the article "Revisiting Key Skills: A Practical Framework for Higher

Education" (2007). When examining the argument of whether we should include key skills in the university curriculum, Washer draws from several influential frameworks to present a list of these essential competence. This list includes communication skills, such as writing, oral communication, and the ability to read, analyze, and summarize information; working with others (e.g., group projects); and, most importantly, the skill of learning how to learn. This includes having research strategies, self-management (time and organizational skills), and the ability to evaluate oneself and improve on one's work (Washer, 2007, pp. 62–65). This list closely aligns with the skills evaluated in this research and serves as the foundation for what is later defined as the key skills students need to be better prepared for university. These skills can also be effectively addressed by incorporating a SCL approach in university, as discussed earlier in the literature review of this methodology.

Similar research also suggests that the previously mentioned skills are key when addressing the basic requirements for higher education. Lourdes Aranda, Esther Mena-Rodriguez, and Laura Rubio also explored this topic in their article "*Basic Skills in Higher Education: An Analysis of Attributed Importance*," which analyzes the importance of acquiring basic skills by university students in various bachelor's degree programs. The same skills, such as teamwork, organizational skills, and planning capacity, emerged in this article (Aranda, Mena-Rodriguez, Rubio, 2022). An interesting point discussed in this paper, which can be directly associated to SCL, is how "universities must prepare both professors and their students for the new challenges of the 21st century. It is necessary for professors to train in skills to be able to teach them" (Aranda, Mena-Rodriguez, Rubio, 2022, p. 6). This can be correlated with the use of SCL in the teaching approach to better prepare professors to facilitate students' assimilation of

these key skills, allowing them to successfully complete their academic endeavors and be better prepared for the labor market after their academic journey.

2.5 Dropout Rates

An argument against said changes is the appealing percentage of students who obtain a degree within seven years of graduating high school, that is, 85%. However, although this percentage is quite high, it conceals a much darker reality. Indeed, the dropout rate of 9.3% previously mentioned represents over 3 million Canadians, almost twice the population of Montréal. Also, the consequences of lacking a high school diploma are more dire than one might think.

In the article "Consequences of Dropping Out of School: Findings from High School and Beyond" by Edward J. McCaul, Gordon A. Donaldson Jr., Theodore Coladarci, and William E. Davis from the University of Maine, the topic of dropping out and its consequences is analyzed in greater depth. The article examines the social and financial repercussions that dropouts may have on society. One significant finding is that "male dropouts reported having more jobs than graduates, and that finding is consistent with the traditional view of dropouts having less secure employment and perhaps moving rapidly from one dead-end job to another" (McCaul et al., p. 205, 2010). This supports the notion that individuals may need multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

Furthermore, the financial implications for individuals are significant. The research estimates that "male graduates earn \$266,000 more over their lifetimes, and female graduates earn \$199,000 more than dropouts" (Catterall, 1985). Other studies have estimated a 1.47 ratio of earnings for graduates compared to dropouts (Lewis, Bruininks, Thurlow, & McGrew, 1988).

Finally, the last alarming result from this study relates to the health of dropout students. "Male dropouts consumed significantly more alcohol than graduates, and in a society increasingly concerned with the negative consequences of substance abuse, both for individuals and society, this finding is troubling" (McCaul et al., p. 204, 2010).

Overall, the findings in this study illustrate how dropping out of high school can lead to "alienation from adult norms and values as well as contribute to an alienation from society at large" (Ibid). It is important to remind readers that this is a singular research project that would benefit from further analysis. Nonetheless, research like this highlights the critical importance of obtaining a high school diploma and the urgent need to address dropout rates. Alternative structures of education may provide a potential solution to the ongoing social North America currently face.

In addition, this study does not consider the socio-economic consequences that brings a student to drop out of school. A study on the same topic found that a large portion of the disparity between high school graduates and high school dropouts is explained by social and economic background. This speaks to the limit of schools and also supports recent shifts in antipoverty policies that focus on intervention at the community level (e.g. Promise Neighborhoods and Promise Zones). Efforts to improve the socioeconomic position of high school dropouts do not need to be limited to classroom walls." (Campbell, p. 117, 2015)

This is another interesting aspect of high-school dropout which alternative structure of education has limited power over. It is important to remember that the systematic structure at play influences greatly the opportunities one may have to access high-quality of education which may allow for an SCL approach.

2.6 Emerging Challenges

It is important to shed light on the challenges students face as well as the emerging new challenges that come with the advancement of technology, socio-economical situations and most recently, the impact of COVID-19 to understand how beneficial alternative structures can be to the current educational system. I have selected three main articles to analyze deeper what are the emerging challenges that students face in recent times.

2.6a Covid-19

It comes as no surprise that an altering world event also had consequences on education in general. According to a research paper conducted in the US titled ‘ *More Than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of U.S. College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic*’, Alyssa Lederer, Mary Hoban, Sarah Lipson, Sasha Zhou and Daniel Eisenberg looks at one of the major consequences of Covid-19, mental health issues. ‘ ‘ Students were already experiencing high rates of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic’ (Lederer, Hoban, Lipson, Zhou, Eisenberg, 2021, p.14-15). The emergence of Covid only came to exacerbate this issue even further due to multiple layers of new challenges students started to face. Some challenges came directly related to education such as the new online structures of education which consequently resulted in a lack of social connectedness and sense of belonging (Ibid.). Others came in the form of financial and housing consequences where many students ended up losing their jobs, faced food insecurity and general economic challenges which still lingers to this day (Ibid., p.16). Following this same train of thought, diminished income also implies that the technology required in order to attend these online classes has become more difficult for many students to obtain. Finally, given the large scale of this pandemic

and its consequences, the support systems which were already in place were not suited well enough to help all of those who started facing these new waves of challenges (Ibid., p.17).

The new challenges that emerged during the global pandemic were unexpected and difficult to anticipate. These challenges continue to affect many students today, highlighting the need for a more adaptable educational structure, such as SCL. For example, based on the previous definitions of SCL, if professors had been better trained in this approach, they would have been better equipped to handle emerging issues, like the shift to online teaching. Traditional teaching methods, which most professors rely on, are less flexible and harder to adapt to an online format, making it more challenging to effectively engage students in a virtual setting. Following this same idea, while education struggled to deal with the technological challenges that came alongside COVID-19, the educational system is also facing a new emerging concept: the age of technology and automation.

2.6b Technology and Information Management

As previously mentioned, Covid forced students to rely on technology to access their classes, exams, essays, and other academic activities. However, this shift moved students away from the traditional approach to evaluation, which typically involved a class full of students who had a few hours to read a text, write an essay, or answer multiple questions, relying solely on memorization. This structure was rendered obsolete once evaluations took place on the same platform that provided access to the vast knowledge of the World Wide Web.

In their article titled "*Higher Education and Emerging Technologies: Shifting Trends in Student Usage*," Cassidy, Colmenares, Jones, Manolovitz, Shen, and Vieira examine the increasing use and dependence on educational technologies among students. They highlight the

need for libraries to adapt their services to meet students' preferences and technological advancements (Cassidy, Colmenares, Jones, Manolovitz, Shen, Vieira, 2014, pp. 124-125). For example, one point that emerges is the constant access to mobile devices and the easy availability of information. While this comes with both pros and cons, there is a need for continuous engagement with the learning content, even if it is taught in a classroom setting or via a laptop or mobile device (Ibid, p. 126). The same can be said for service access, such as libraries, which this article discusses (Ibid., p. 129). However, this can go further when discussing mental health support and other services that were previously offered only in person.

This new and constantly evolving technological landscape presents significant challenges, especially when universities fail to adapt to the growing presence of online information. The rapid emergence of new apps, platforms, devices, and technologies impacts students in various ways. However, by embracing these changes, adopting alternative approaches, and offering greater flexibility in teaching and learning methods, universities can transform these challenges into valuable opportunities. Instead of resisting technological advancements, institutions can leverage them to better serve students' needs and enhance the overall educational experience.

2.6c Labour market or lifelong learning?

While the labour market is not an emerging challenge students are facing, it has evolved in ways that now present new obstacles for students. Additionally, students' expectations regarding education are shifting. Education is no longer viewed solely as a means to secure a job; instead, students are increasingly seeking a more holistic approach that emphasizes personal growth, lifelong learning, and the development of diverse skills that go beyond mere job preparation (Hines, 2017). In his article titled "*Emerging Student Needs Disrupting Higher Education*," Andy Hines examines this shift in student expectations. He argues that the purpose

of higher education is to move away from solely job preparation toward a more comprehensive approach that includes personal growth and lifelong learning (Hines, 2017, p. 203). This shift also changes the balance of power, transferring more influence from institutions to students. Students are becoming more active in shaping the learning agenda and determining how it is implemented (Ibid., p. 202).

As a result, new student needs are emerging, such as the need for re-skilling, personalized mentoring, continuous feedback, and individualized instruction. (Ibid., p. 207) Hines asserts that “students need the means to acquire relevant knowledge and skills customized to their individual style.” These changes indicate that universities and higher education institutions must reconsider their purpose, mission, and value proposition in light of these evolving student expectations. Moreover, there is a need for a broader societal conversation about the future of education and the best ways to prepare students for it (Ibid.). This shift toward a more personalized and holistic approach to education highlights the necessity for alternative educational models that better align with student’s needs and aspirations.

Going in the opposite direction, SCL can also be beneficial for those who still go to university for the sole purpose of intergrading the labour market. In their 2019 study, "Student-Centred Learning in Higher Education: Implications for the Jamaican Workplace," Stephen R. Wallder and Nardia J. Brown explore the impact of SCL approaches in higher education and their potential effects on the Jamaican workforce. By focusing on the benefits of student engagement, collaboration, and personalized learning, the study seeks to assess whether these educational strategies align with the needs of employers in Jamaica. (Wallder & brown, 2019)

The authors analyze various aspects of SCL, including its capacity to enhance critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and adaptability, qualities that are highly valued in the

professional realm. They argue that SCL not only prepares students for immediate job requirements but also equips them with long-term competencies that can contribute to their career growth and effectiveness in the workplace. The study highlights how SCL fosters a learning environment that mirrors real-world challenges, potentially leading to better-prepared graduates who can thrive in diverse and dynamic work settings.

Despite the promising outlook, Wallder and Brown also address potential challenges in implementing SCL in the Jamaican context. They discuss issues such as the need for institutional support, faculty training, and resource allocation to effectively transition from traditional to Student-Centered methods. Overall, the study suggests that while SCL has significant potential to benefit both students and employers, successful implementation requires careful consideration of local educational and workplace contexts.

2.7 Geographical Context in North America

It is important to contextualize the geographical setting of this research and explore the role that SCL plays in this area. This research is being conducted in Quebec, Canada, specifically in Montreal. However, it also aims to reflect the broader context in other parts of Canada and of the United States. Consequently, the following provides an overview of the situation in Quebec, alongside relevant observations from the United States.

Although this thesis primarily focuses on SCL, it is important to consider other alternative educational structures. Some theorists argue that anything outside the traditional K-12 system qualifies as an alternative approach to education (Aron, 2006). In her article, "An Overview of Alternative Education," Laudan Aron examines dropout rates in the United States and suggests that alternative education could help these students complete their high school

education. She argues that different educational programs may benefit students depending on their specific situations (Ibid., p.3).

It is worth examining the situation in the U.S. to understand broader trends. Similar to Quebec, the U.S. faces significant dropout rates, which have notable economic and social consequences. For instance, in 1971, male dropouts earned an average of \$35,087 (adjusted for 2002 dollars), but by 2002, this figure had decreased by 35% to \$23,903 (Barton, 2005, p. 2). Additionally, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 5.3% of U.S. students dropped out of high school in 2022 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). These figures underscore the ongoing relevance of education reforms and alternative educational structures.

In Quebec, alternative schools for elementary and high school degrees are public institutions integrated into school boards, focused on personalized learning and holistic student development. These schools promote a dynamic, participatory, and humanistic educational environment where numerous individuals such as administrators, teachers, and parents, actively contribute to student growth.

While maintaining the goals set by the Quebec Ministry of Education, alternative schools offer flexible curricula that adapt to individual learning paces. Continuous qualitative assessments involve teachers, parents, and students. Key features of these schools include a seven-year primary level and a five-year secondary level, both without strict distinctions between grades. The emphasis is on personal, project-based learning, multi-age groupings for collaborative work, active parental involvement as co-educators, and fostering student participation in decision-making and social life to promote responsible citizenship (RÉPAC, 2024).

Alternative educational structures are not new, even in Montreal. Although this section focuses on elementary and high schools, it illustrates the growing demand for alternative education. According to REPAQ (Réseau des écoles publiques alternatives du Québec), 45 schools across 21 school boards in Quebec use alternative approaches to education, with 13 located in Montreal.

Quebec's alternative public schools adopt a socio-constructivist approach, encouraging students to learn at their own pace through group work and individual projects. Evaluation focuses on individual progress rather than peer comparison, with personalized report cards assessing both academic and personal growth. Parental involvement is essential, as families are expected to participate in school activities and governance. The schools are organized into networks that foster collaboration among principals, teachers, and parents, enhancing educational practices. This model effectively prepares graduates to be self-directed, autonomous learners who contribute positively to society (RÉPAC, 2024).

While this brief description summarizes alternative educational structures in elementary and high school, the analysis will provide more context on how alternative approaches to education are experienced by students in the context of CEGEP and university.

3. Research Question

To understand my research question, it's important to first define the educational models I will explore, focusing on traditional versus alternative structures. The traditional educational model, prevalent in most institutions, involves professors delivering lectures while students take notes, followed by assessments such as quizzes or exams to measure comprehension. These assessments determine academic standing and influence future opportunities.

While effective for some, this model can be detrimental to others. Certain students excel in memorization and perform well under exam pressure, but others experience significant stress or struggle to focus during lectures. High academic pressure can also hinder students' potential, leading to disengagement and reinforcing the misconception that success in this framework reflects intelligence. This creates a cycle where at-risk students may feel inadequate, increasing the risk of dropout. In contrast, alternative educational structures aim to address these challenges, offering different approaches that may better support diverse learning styles and reduce the negative impacts on vulnerable students.

I believe that a shift in approach could break this cycle, allowing for a more inclusive educational system without simply lowering standards. Rather than reducing passing grades or making education easier, we should consider introducing methods that better align with the individual needs and learning styles of students. By tailoring education to accommodate diverse learners, we can maintain academic rigour while ensuring that all students have an equitable opportunity to succeed.

This leads me to my research question: How can alternative educational structures, such as Student-Centered Learning, address the diverse needs of students and reduce dropout rates while maintaining academic rigour, compared to traditional teaching methods? The following methodology section will explain in more detail how I obtained my data and how the analysis of these results will help better answer this question.

4. Methodology

The methodology section of this thesis outlines the structured approach used to investigate the effectiveness of Student-Centered Learning in higher education. The research aims to explore

how SCL influences dropout rates and student engagement compared to traditional educational methods. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of SCL's impact on students and educators. This methodological framework is designed to ensure robust data collection and analysis, facilitating a nuanced understanding of SCL's potential benefits and limitations.

4.1 Research Design

The research design for this study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of Student-Centered Learning. The quantitative component involved an online survey designed to gather data from a large sample of students. This survey assessed students' experiences with SCL, their perceptions of its effectiveness, and its impact on academic engagement and retention. It also explored students' overall academic journey to identify approaches that worked best for them and gauge their readiness for university. The survey included demographic variables such as gender, age, and ethnicity to analyze correlations between subgroups and individual experiences, aiming to understand why certain methods may have been more effective for some students than for others.

To ensure data integrity, a filter was implemented to prevent incomplete surveys from being submitted, minimizing the risk of inaccurate or missing data. The survey contains 30 questions to maintain clarity and avoid overwhelming participants. To reduce bias, most questions use a Likert scale or multiple-choice format, with a few open-ended questions included to capture personal opinions and biases on specific topics. The decision to conduct the quantitative data collection before the qualitative interviews was intentional. While a preliminary plan for the interview questions was in place, collecting the quantitative data first provided

additional information that helped refine and adjust the interview questions as needed. This approach ensures that any ambiguities in the quantitative data can be further clarified through the interviews. The qualitative component comprises two sections: semi-structured interviews with students and semi-structured interviews with professors. These interviews provide deeper insights into individual experiences with SCL, exploring personal anecdotes and gathering detailed feedback on the advantages and challenges of this learning approach. They also aim to address any questions or concerns that arise during the quantitative data analysis.

The mixed-methods approach was chosen to combine numerical data with rich, contextual insights. Quantitative data offers statistical evidence of trends and patterns, while qualitative data delves into the underlying reasons behind these trends. (Dehalwar, K., & Sharma, S. N., 2024) This combination allows for a more comprehensive analysis of SCL's effectiveness and its implications for educational practice. Additionally, it provides flexibility in addressing potential challenges during data collection. For instance, a small participant turnout in the quantitative phase may necessitate further data collection. However, the qualitative data can still offer valuable, in-depth insights even with a smaller sample size, ensuring a robust understanding of the topic.

4.2 Data Collection

The data collection for this study involved several phases. First, I conducted a broad literature review to identify existing research on SCL and its applications in higher education. This review helped refine my research questions and informed the development of both the survey and interview guides. The literature review utilized various academic databases, including Scopus, Blackwell Encyclopedia, EBSCOhost, and the Concordia University library, resulting in

the extraction of over 150 articles. After filtering, 80 relevant articles were selected, revealing a gap in case studies specific to Montreal and Quebec.

With this gap identified, I shifted focus to Concordia University, a pioneer in alternative educational approaches (Buck, 2022). The research design aimed to explore SCL within this context, leveraging the university's commitment to innovative teaching methods. To ensure a representative sample, the survey targeted students who had completed at least one semester at Concordia, with a particular focus on Sociology and Anthropology classes. This also ensured that all participants were over 18, which was in line with ethical considerations. These disciplines were initially chosen due to their alignment with the social sciences and their potential for diverse perspectives on SCL. However, after multiple attempts to gather enough participants from Sociology and Anthropology classes, I broadened the focus to include other social sciences programs, such as Irish Studies, as well as additional humanities disciplines. In total, 119 participants completed the online survey.

The data collection process began with the creation of an online survey using Concordia's Qualtrics platform. This platform was chosen for ethical reasons, ensuring compliance with institutional guidelines and facilitating easier analysis. The survey underwent several rounds of testing, incorporating feedback from peers and my supervisor to refine its design and ensure its effectiveness. The final version of the survey was distributed to students via class presentations and email invitations. The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions: 10 focused on personal information to create subgroups, and 20 addressed students' experiences to determine if certain groups shared similar experiences. Although the questionnaire was expected to take around 30 minutes, many were completed in under 20 minutes.

The second phase of quantitative data collection required some fieldwork. To find participants for the survey, I started by listing professors teaching Anthropology and Sociology classes. After compiling a list of about 20 professors and their classes, I contacted professors to explain my research on alternative educational structures, specifically SCL, and requested participants for the survey. After receiving permission to visit their classes, I scheduled the visits, where I presented my project, collected consent forms, and emailed the survey link to students. This approach minimized class disruption and allowed students to complete the survey at their convenience. In total, I visited around 12 different classes but stopped once I began encountering the same students across multiple classes.

To keep track of participants, I developed a spreadsheet with students' names, emails, and participation status. If a student had answered the survey, I updated the Excel document accordingly. Additionally, I noted whether they expressed interest in future interviews. Reminders to fill out the survey were sent initially one week after the first email, with a second reminder sent two weeks later and a final reminder sent one week before the survey's closing date. Students were informed via email of the deadline to ensure all information was submitted in time. In addition to the survey, I conducted individual interviews to gain deeper insights into students' and professors' experiences with SCL. I initially planned for 10-15 student interviews and 2-4 professor interviews, focusing on gathering qualitative data to complement the survey findings. In the end, I interviewed 11 students and 3 professors.

Student interviews were selected based on survey responses indicating interest in discussing their experiences with SCL in more depth. Those who expressed interest were contacted via email to confirm participation and schedule online meetings via Zoom, ensuring flexibility. Each interview began with a consent process, confirming participants' understanding

of the study and agreeing to audio recording. Interviews explored participants' initial university preparedness, feelings of readiness, and potential improvements. Discussions included variations in comprehension across classes, course depth, grade-knowledge correlation, and the impact of SCL versus traditional methods on grades. Participants shared experiences with feedback, collaboration, competition, and their well-being over time. The interviews also addressed how deadlines influenced learning and preferences for structured versus flexible course outlines.

The professors' interviews were also conducted via Zoom for flexibility and efficiency, beginning with the same consent process as the student interviews. I explored various aspects of teaching and learning, including students' preparedness for university and its impact on their academic experience. The discussion covered course content depth, grading methods, and preferences between traditional and alternative teaching approaches like SCL. We also examined the role of collaboration and competition in the classroom, their influence on student well-being, and the impact of deadlines on learning. Finally, we discussed whether course outlines should be flexible or structured.

4.3 Sample/Population

The study's sample comprises undergraduate students and professors from Concordia University. The target population for the survey included students who had completed at least one semester of university, with an initial goal of obtaining responses from approximately 300 students. This sample size was chosen to ensure statistical reliability and representativeness within the context of the university's student body. However, after multiple attempts to gather participants and visit over 12 different classes, it became clear that this goal would not be achievable. In the end, 119 participants completed the online questionnaire. While this number is smaller than the original target, it is important to note that this is a pilot project aimed at better

understanding students' knowledge and opinions of SCL. Furthermore, the quantitative data was supplemented with qualitative insights, allowing for a comparative analysis of the gathered information.

For the qualitative interviews, the sample included a subset of survey participants who expressed interest in providing additional feedback and a selection of professors familiar with SCL. Since these professors were already aware of my research and its purpose, I contacted those who had allowed me to visit their classes to see if they were interested in participating in interviews. The interviews aimed to capture diverse perspectives, focusing on experiences from students who had engaged with SCL and traditional learning methods. While the emphasis on Sociology and Anthropology classes was designed to provide a focused view of SCL within the social sciences, the findings may have broader implications.

4.4 Questionnaire Guide and Interview Guide

The questionnaire was developed to provide a broader context for people's opinions about Student-Centered Learning. Its goal was to extract core concepts or themes that could be explored more deeply through interviews, aiming for a holistic understanding of SCL. The questionnaire includes a variety of question types, including Likert scales, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions. These were designed to capture different dimensions of students' experiences with SCL, such as their satisfaction, perceived effectiveness, and challenges faced. The questionnaire underwent several rounds of testing, including a pilot test with a small group of participants, to ensure clarity, relevance, and effectiveness. Feedback from these test sessions was used to refine the questions and improve the overall structure of the questionnaire.

The interview guide was created to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness in data collection. It features open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about

participants' experiences with SCL. For students, the questions focus on personal experiences with SCL, its impact on their learning and engagement, and their perceptions of its effectiveness compared to traditional methods. For professors, the questions explore their perspectives on SCL, its implementation in their courses, and its perceived impact on student outcomes.

The interview guide was tested with a small group of peers to ensure clarity and relevance. Feedback from these test interviews was used to refine the questions and improve the overall structure of the guide. Interviews were conducted via Zoom to allow for flexible scheduling and efficient data collection. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was recorded for transcription and analysis. The final version of the guide provides a structured framework for conducting interviews that yield rich, actionable data for analysis.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the research design and data collection process. Approval from the ethics review board was obtained before any data collection began. The online questionnaire included a detailed explanation of the ethical considerations, the implications of participation, and an overview of the research. A section in the questionnaire asked students if they understood the risks, benefits, and implications of their participation. When visiting classes, I provided a detailed oral explanation of the ethical considerations before collecting students' email addresses. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Consent forms were provided, outlining their involvement and the potential risks and benefits. To address ethical concerns, I anonymized all survey responses and interview recordings, securely storing the data. Participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, up until the day of the thesis defense. After that date, withdrawal was no longer possible.

Additionally, the research adhered to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent and respecting participants' privacy.

4.6 Data Analysis Procedures and Lessons Learned

The data analysis phase employed a dual approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed using Excel, with a focus on statistical analysis to identify patterns and correlations related to Student-Centered Learning and its impact on student engagement and dropout rates. Cross-analysis tables were constructed to compare responses across different groups and variables. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcription services provided by Zoom facilitated the transcription of interview recordings, which were then reviewed and coded to extract key themes and insights. This qualitative analysis aimed to enrich the quantitative findings by offering a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions of SCL. Finally, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were compared with existing scientific literature on the relevant themes to provide a broader understanding of the observed results.

I first provided a descriptive analysis of the quantitative data gathered through the online survey. Following this, I linked testimonies from participants obtained through the online interviews to offer a more in-depth analysis that contextualized the numerical data. Additionally, there was a section dedicated to supplementary information that was not addressed in the survey but was nonetheless pertinent to the topic of alternative education structures. Ultimately, I examined the scientific literature to assess whether my findings aligned with those of other researchers in this field. This comparative analysis enhanced my understanding of my results and their resonance within the scientific community.

While my approach to the structure of the quiz made sense at the time, while conducting my analysis, it has come to my attention that I could have provided more structure for certain questions. For example, in terms of language spoken or country/province where students graduated high school, it would have been beneficial to offer multiple choices instead of offering open answer boxes. This would have minimized the number of possible ways an individual may write a province or a language. When it was time to analyze the data, I ended up with 3 different ways of writing French for example or multiple options for gender as well (F, Female, Women, female, women, etc.). All these little details could have been easily dealt with if I had provided more structure in the possible answers in the survey while at the same time offering the box other for a deeper analysis. This is all superficial but still something I have learned about research regarding the methodological approaches to use for future projects.

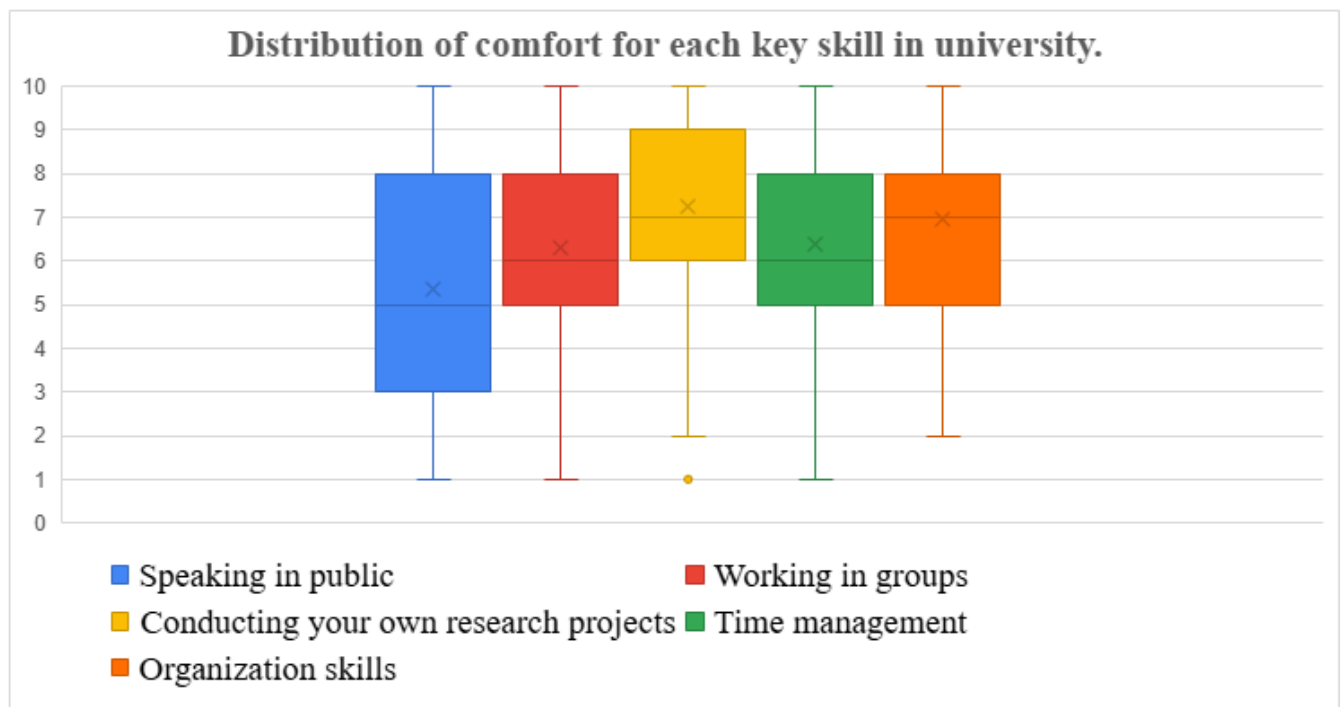
5. Analysis

The first part of my analysis focuses on education before entering university as well as the first few years of university. I start by evaluating the preparedness of students in the context of the university to see if high school and CEGEP have prepared students properly for what they will experience at university through multiple questions from the online survey I developed and gathered data with (**See in annex**). This provides quantitative data to better understand where students position themselves in terms of readiness and the complexity of what it means to be prepared for university. Then, I look into the biggest challenges students face to provide more context about what it is that students have issues with and where efforts should be made to better equip universities and professors to address these challenges. Next, I address the question directly whether students feel prepared for university with qualitative data from the interviews I

have conducted. By asking indirect questions before directly addressing readiness, I can assess students' self-understanding without putting them on the spot. This approach allows me to explore their beliefs in a broader context before asking the specific question 'Why do you consider yourself either ready or not for university?' It also helps me identify discrepancies between different aspects of readiness, such as public speaking, teamwork, or writing skills, and whether the student feels prepared. Finally, I analyze the interviews a second time to better understand why some students consider themselves prepared while others do not. This will serve as the first part of my analysis, aiming to demonstrate the need for an alternative approach in academia, especially in universities and to address the emerging needs and challenges of students discussed in the literature review on pages 22 to 26.

5.1 Academic Experience

The first step in my analysis aims to better understand students' academic experiences and what they experienced in terms of class structure, types of assignments, and types of activities they underwent either before university or in the early stages of university. To do so, I examined my online survey, which I designed and administered via the Qualtrics application, that revealed students' comfort levels with five key skills: public speaking, group work, conducting research, time management, and organizational skills. On a scale of one to ten, students rated their comfort with public speaking at an average of 5.34, indicating moderate discomfort, with a median score of 5. In contrast, they expressed greater comfort with group work (average 6.29, median 6) and conducting their own research (average 7.26, median 7), while time management and organizational skills received moderate scores of 6.4 and 6.95, respectively. These results suggest that while students generally feel moderately comfortable with these skills, there is significant room for improvement, particularly in public speaking.



This finding has important implications for alternative structures of education such as SCL, which could better address student needs and enhance retention rates. This is demonstrated in the literature review on pages 19 to 21 where the pros and cons of SCL are elaborated in more depth. The moderate scores in what I have defined as essential skills on pages 21 to 23, highlight potential shortcomings in traditional educational methods, indicating that SCL, which emphasizes active engagement and collaboration, may foster skill development more effectively.

The higher comfort level associated with conducting personal research aligns with SCL principles and students reported having more agency in their education. This suggests that such an approach may lead to increased engagement and potentially reduce dropout rates by encouraging students to pursue interests that resonate with them. As argued in Michel Janosz, Sherri L. Bisset, Linda S. Pagan and Ben Levin's book *Educational Systems and School Dropout in Canada*, "since the reasons for dropout are multifaceted, preventative policies focus on a variety of aspects, for example, strengthening the Dual System; promoting better cooperation

between the educational system and the labour market; providing module-based curricula; enhancing the quality of instructors; intensifying access tests, educational counselling and matching services; as well as concentrating on problem-based, project-oriented teaching and learning methods.” (Janosz, Bisset, Pagani & Levin, 2010, p.167). In other words, having a more inclusive approach to education may help to reduce dropout rates.

However, the traditional educational methods often require students to engage in independent research, potentially contributing to a greater comfort previously observed. However, the traditional model tends to focus on individual responsibility without the collaborative, problem-solving elements that SCL promotes. Therefore, integrating aspects of SCL could help further enhance student engagement and reduce dropout rates by fostering a more personalized and relevant learning experience.

The relatively high comfort level in group work indicates that students value collaborative environments; thus, SCL methodologies, which leverage teamwork, can help create a supportive atmosphere that mitigates feelings of isolation and enhances retention.

Additionally, the low score in public speaking highlights a barrier to academic success, and SCL can offer more opportunities for practice in a supportive context, which is crucial for building confidence in essential skills necessary for both academic and professional success. Contrary to concerns that SCL might dilute academic standards, it can actually enhance rigour through immersive, project-based learning that aligns with students' diverse learning styles and preferences.

To demonstrate further why alternative approaches to education are important, I provide quantitative data regarding how ready students are for university. Following the previously

mentioned questions about comfort levels in various aspects of student life, an overarching question was posed: Were you prepared for university when you first started? The results are closely divided, with 59 participants indicating they were not ready for university, while 60 participants felt they were. This suggests that nearly half of the students in my sample felt unprepared for university, which is surprising given that their average comfort level regarding the five common activities scored 6.45 out of 10. This trend does not align with the observed data regarding readiness for university. However, this may be explained by the fact that students depend mostly on other skills not previously mentioned, such as memorization or other important skills. To better understand the reasons behind this discrepancy, or to understand if other factors affected the readiness of students, I turn to the interviews I had conducted with professors and students when discussing the question of readiness for university. The following is an analysis of the sum of each student's and professor's opinions on the subject.

5.1a Complexity of Preparedness

Many students reported feeling unprepared for university learning despite having moderate comfort levels with common activities such as conducting their own research or organizational skills, suggesting that familiarity with tasks does not equate to readiness for the unique challenges of university life. This disconnect highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to be "prepared." For instance, students who transitioned from high school directly to university struggled with the sudden shift in expectations regarding independence and self-management. In contrast, those who attended Cegep found that the gradual increase in responsibility helped ease their transition. This points to the importance of transitional programs that build skills progressively rather than overwhelming students with newfound freedoms all at once.

The experiences shared emphasize how different educational backgrounds shape preparedness. For example, students from competitive private schools often reported feeling more equipped for university due to personalized attention and high expectations. In contrast, those coming from larger, less personalized environments faced greater challenges in adapting. The variability in support and resources across different educational settings raises questions about equity in preparation. It underscores the idea that not all students have the same access to the tools and experiences that foster readiness, suggesting a need for reforms that ensure all students receive adequate preparation regardless of their previous educational experiences.

5.1b Biggest challenges

When considering how prepared students are for university, I began to wonder if there were recurring challenges that could indicate ways to address the underlying issues of unpreparedness. In the survey I conducted, I asked a question specifically related to this: What are the biggest challenges students face at school? The results varied, but a few key themes emerged. For example, the most common challenge mentioned was time management, with 24 students reporting issues in this area. The second most frequent answer was a lack of interest and/or motivation, with 21 students citing this as a concern.

Time management challenges can likely be attributed to students transitioning directly from high school to university. Many students, during interviews, noted a significant difference between those who attended CEGEP and those who did not. Whether it was themselves or their friends who attended CEGEP, the transitional years between high school and university seemed to help students become more independent and take greater responsibility for their academic success. These responsibilities include time management, but also organizational skills, which 9 students identified as their biggest challenge.

On the other hand, the lack of interest and motivation can be explained by several factors. One explanation that emerged in the interviews was that some students are in university due to social pressures, particularly from parents who strongly encourage them to pursue higher education. Some students even reported feeling "forced" to attend university. However, the primary reason many students experience a lack of motivation or interest lies in the structure of academia itself.

Nearly all of the students interviewed mentioned that they were initially excited about their classes. In fact, most of them reported feeling motivated and interested in their subjects at the start. However, many also noted that the structure of their programs, with an abundance of required (mandatory) courses, is where their interest wanes. This decline in motivation is not due to a dislike of introductory classes; on the contrary, students were eager to learn about these foundational concepts. The problem, however, is that these 200-level introductory courses often lack depth. They tend to focus on introducing canon thinkers without delving deeply into their ideas. As a result, many students felt disengaged. Instead of developing a true understanding of the core concepts, they felt they were merely memorizing information to regurgitate on exams. In fact, 15 students mentioned that one of their biggest challenges was memorization.

All of this suggests that the two main challenges students face, time management and lack of interest/motivation, could potentially be alleviated by incorporating elements of SCL or other alternative educational approaches. For students transitioning directly from high school, adopting an SCL approach, where students have a say in how or what they learn, could help them develop the independence necessary to navigate academia.

Regarding students' lack of interest in certain subjects, professors could enhance engagement by paying closer attention to which topics resonate most with students, while still

adhering to course requirements. By finding ways to relate core concepts to contemporary social issues, professors could foster greater student interest. Some students reported finding certain core concepts dull and unengaging, while others were more enthusiastic, especially when they saw how these ideas connected to real-world issues. This suggests that a re-evaluation of what constitutes "core concepts" and mandatory courses might help better address students' challenges and increase engagement.

Starting with public speaking, this issue particularly affects students who transition directly from high school to university. While High School does provide some exposure to class presentations and group discussions, it lacks the two-year gap that students attending CEGEP experience. In CEGEP, students are often required to prepare and present complex research projects to their peers. Some classes even require teamwork, which fosters public speaking skills and encourages greater ease in communicating with others. This experience may help explain why some students face significant challenges in public speaking at the university level. Additionally, introverted or shy students may struggle with speaking up in class, as reflected in the following testimony:

"Being introverted, I found it hard to raise my hand and ask questions, which usually allowed the teachers to help me answer questions and learn. As a dyslexic, I struggled to keep up with everyone else in the class, needing to spend more time learning the same materials, mainly due to reading and writing slower than everyone else. Because of falling behind, I struggle to think of things that I want to learn."

This highlights the need for SCL approaches that could benefit such students, such as working in small groups or providing a comfortable environment where students can ask questions without fear of judgment.

A second challenge commonly mentioned by twelve students was class loads, which is related to the additional pressure of work outside of school mentioned by two students. While not many students listed work outside of school as one of their biggest challenges, several participants in the interviews spoke about balancing work with their academic responsibilities. One participant mentioned working 30 to 40 hours per week while taking five courses per semester. This illustrates how students have demanding lives outside of school.

Returning to the twelve students who identified class loads as a major challenge, it is essential for professors to acknowledge the current socio-economic context. With rising inflation, high rent, and the general cost of living, many students cannot afford to attend school full-time without working part-time, even while receiving student loans. While the responsibility does not fall solely on the professors, it is important for them to listen to students, especially when discussing exams and evaluations. Some students prefer multiple assessments throughout the semester to lessen the weight of the final exam, while others may appreciate more flexible options that align better with their daily responsibilities. One student shared her experience regarding overburdened course loads:

"Personally, the demand of the course load for a student to excel in a class is unrealistic. Having to read 80+ pages per class every week is excessive and does not allow for any real information to be absorbed. I also believe that there should be alternative methods of evaluating a student's comprehension and learning. With all this being said, my biggest challenge is the effect my education has on my mental well-being. From being overwhelmed and overworked, I do not think I always perform to the best of my ability and tend to lack motivation to complete the semester. I suspect I have ADHD or some form of neurodivergence, and thus reading long texts and focusing on class requires a lot of effort. For example, I rely on 'accommodations': I

copy-paste all of my readings into a Word document so it can read them out loud for me, and I take non-stop notes or doodle to stay focused (as it keeps my hands busy).”

Lastly, a quote from a student survey response summarizes the challenges students face and how alternative approaches, such as SCL, could improve their academic experience:

"Traditional assessment structures pose the biggest challenges for me. Personally, I believe traditional, timed, and standardized exams do not equally assess students' academic capabilities and knowledge. While they may be easier to grade, they do not account for students' individual learning styles and pacing. Further, I find they lead to cramming and memorization, which fail to foster long-term understanding of the material. To be blunt, I hate time restrictions. They take my attention off the test and leave me stressing about the clock. Often, I have not been able to complete assessments due to running out of time. I do much better and develop a considerably deeper understanding of material when I am assessed in more student-led, individualized ways. An example would be essay-style exams where I can research a topic of interest, engage in critical thinking, plan, and produce a written response. I also struggle in classes where there are no visual aids and learning is solely based on reading texts."

5.1c Navigating University and the Role of Faculty Support

Faculty perspectives further illuminate the challenges faced by students. Professors expressed concerns about students lacking essential writing and critical thinking skills, which are crucial for success in university. This suggests a gap in the educational system that needs addressing, both in high schools and CEGEP. Professors also noted the difficulty of providing individualized support in large classes, indicating a systemic issue where students may feel lost and unsupported. This highlights the necessity for universities to create environments that

facilitate more personalized interactions, such as smaller class sizes or dedicated support staff, to help students navigate their academic journeys.

The transition to university is not just an academic one; it involves learning to navigate a complex system of resources, expectations, and social dynamics. Many students reported feeling unprepared for the practical aspects of university life, such as finding resources or understanding how to seek help. This gap in knowledge can lead to feelings of isolation and overwhelm, particularly for those who are first-generation students or come from backgrounds where higher education is less familiar. Institutions should consider implementing orientation programs that focus not only on academic skills but also on practical life skills that help students acclimate to the university environment.

The analysis of student experiences regarding preparedness for university underscores the multifaceted nature of this transition. It highlights the importance of tailored educational experiences, the need for institutional support, and the role of faculty in guiding students. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that considers academic readiness alongside emotional and practical preparedness. By enhancing support systems and creating more equitable educational pathways such as by the usage of alternative approaches to education, universities can better equip students for the demands of higher education, ultimately fostering a more successful and inclusive academic environment.

5.2 Understanding of Classical vs. Alternative Structure of Education

To address the challenges students face regarding preparedness for university, we must examine their understanding of how to develop a better-suited approach to education. This approach should ensure that more students enter university prepared while also prompting

universities to adapt to the reality that high school and CEGEP do not always adequately prepare students for the undergraduate level. This is where alternative approaches to education can be beneficial, especially during the first and second semesters of university. These first few semesters are especially important given that many students interviewed had reported having little to no skills regarding how to navigate university and the multifaceted world that comes with it, from managing agendas, to understanding where to have access to certain resources and so on. This is even more important in the case of migrant students who come from abroad, as discussed in an interview done during the data collection. By having an approach that does not take for granted that everyone is on the same level, students may obtain the support and help they need. In addition to this, many of the professor's interview mentioned that they observed how about half of first-year students were not qualified in their writing skills in regard to the expectations of the University. This goes to show even further how these first few semesters are key in the student's journey and would benefit greatly from a more alternative approach which we will see comes often later on the path to graduation.

As mentioned in the intro of this research on page 5, my focus is on Student-Centered Learning because I want to know if it would be a beneficial approach to address challenges I faced while in high school and CEGEP which led me to drop out multiple times. However, to determine if this is a viable approach in university, I first asked students about their level of understanding of SCL to better evaluate if this educational approach was something other students experienced or learned about throughout their academic journey. The goal is to evaluate not only how much students knew about SCL and alternative approaches but also what type of alternative-driven approaches students prefer even if they never heard of SCL before. This will

help evaluate whether they grasp the concept properly and assess whether this approach effectively addresses the issue of unpreparedness in university.

5.2a Students Familiarity with SCL

A large percentage of the students (70 out of 119) who answered this online survey mentioned that they knew about Student-Centered Learning, while the other 49 said they did not. However, to better evaluate their level of understanding, I asked them to provide a definition of what they knew about SCL, and for those who did not know about this approach, I asked them to tell me what they believed SCL, or alternative structures of education in general, was. This resulted in quite a long and exhaustive list of what students understood SCL to be. Those who said they did know about SCL described it as an approach that allowed students to go at their own pace, mentioned pass-fail options, and said that SCL offered choices in what is taught in a class and how it is delivered. They mentioned online and asynchronous learning, discussed Montessori educational ideology, homeschooling, and so on. Those are all answers I had anticipated, but a few individuals provided information that surprised me.

Some students mentioned that alternative approaches to education were something they associated more with younger levels of academia. For example, an individual who answered the online survey mentioned how this idea of SCL was tied to kindergarten and elementary education but also provided an example from real-life experience to demonstrate how this can also be applied to higher levels of education: "I have mostly heard about alternative educational approaches in elementary schools and kindergarten. However, I had a personal experience in some way with Student-Centered education in the event of exceptional circumstances during my senior year. My professor sadly passed away in the middle of the year, and since we had our final exams coming up (the BAC in the French system), we organized ourselves between students to

take turns teaching each other. It lasted for a good two months before the school found us a replacement."

This example goes to show two things: it first demonstrates how SCL or alternative approaches in education is sometimes associated with lower levels of academia. Yet, it also demonstrates how this approach to education can come to the aid of students who face unexpected situations and hardships. This example shows how even when the education system itself fails to address the needs of students, students can take their own education into their own hands and grow with the help of alternative approaches to education.

Many students answered that they did not know what SCL was (49 out of 119). When asked what they believed SCL to be, they mentioned that it was an approach that differed from the standard education structure (for example, the lecture-based approach). They recognized that students learn differently and require various teaching methods, such as visual aids, hands-on activities, and project-based assessments. They emphasized the need for tailored education that focuses on individual interests and strengths instead of uniformity. They also discussed numerous educational options, such as homeschooling, Montessori education, Waldorf education, online education, experiential learning, and so on. They expressed a preference for evaluation methods that prioritize understanding of a subject and creativity. Finally, they discussed the need for flexibility in syllabi and class activities, highlighting discussions and other approaches that do not imply passive memorization of information for a period of three hours.

All this demonstrates that even for those who said they did not know what SCL was, they could easily grasp what they believed it could be, or at the very least, express what they thought could be beneficial to their learning experience. One individual provided a particularly

interesting response when asked what they believed SCL was: “I think there should be smaller classes and better relationships between professors and students. I believe there is too much emphasis placed on grades and GPA rather than actual comprehension. Students are under a lot of pressure to excel no matter what, and not to actually learn or remember what they are studying. Grading is also problematic, especially in social sciences; most comments from professors are pretty unhelpful and critical without being constructive. They also hand back papers without the opportunity to learn from mistakes or improve next time. I also believe that time limits during exams only hold students back from performing, especially during essay questions.”

The previously mentioned beliefs of students about SCL, along with the insightful reflection on what SCL could offer and how it could address the needs of students facing difficulties, illustrate that students recognize the many flaws in the education system. They see possibilities for making education more suitable for students, especially given that we now know that, for the most part, students are not adequately prepared for university.

5.3 Classical Structure of Education vs. Student-Centered Learning

While it is one thing to know about SCL or to have a general understanding of what it entails, it is another to delve into the experiences of students and consider what their personal accounts reveal. In this section, I aim to demonstrate some of the transferable skills that students reported gaining while attending SCL classes. The goal is to illustrate that alternative educational structures can provide the same level of knowledge or skills found in traditional classrooms, while also offering additional opportunities for student learning. The questions posed in the survey were:

- 1. Did you ever take a class which, based on the previous definition, you considered used an alternative approach to education?**
- 2. What are some transferable skills you have gained in a Student-Centered Learning class?**
- 3. What are some transferable skills you gained in a traditional class?**
- 4. What grade did you obtain in this class?**

I chose to analyze percentages to better understand the skills gained in different types of classes. This approach standardized the data, making comparisons easier and avoiding complications that could arise from raw numbers. Of the 119 students surveyed, 51 reported taking or are currently enrolled in a Student-Centered Learning class. To compare skills gained in SCL and traditional classes, I calculated the percentage of responses for each question. For SCL classes, I divided the number of responses by the 51 students who had taken an SCL class. For traditional classes, I used the total number of respondents (119), as all students reported having taken at least one traditional class. I also examined the grades to provide a meaningful comparison between the skills acquired and the average scores achieved in each class type.

The data I collected shows that out of the students who said they did take a SCL, 37 indicated a strong capacity to work in a group, resulting in a notable percentage of 72.55%. Secondly, 22 students or 43.14% expressed confidence in their public speaking abilities. Knowledge of conducting research projects was mentioned by 32 respondents, reflecting a score of 62.75%. Additionally, 30 or 58.82% of participants reported having organizational skills. Lastly, 28 individuals, representing 54.90%, confirmed their proficiency in time management skills.

Among the 68 students who reported never having taken a SCL class, nearly all indicated that they had participated in courses incorporating two or more teaching approaches also present in SCL. Specifically, 61 students mentioned engaging in class discussions, while 52 reported

involvements in class activities. Additionally, 58 students noted their participation in class presentations. Some students also enjoyed a degree of autonomy, with 29 indicating they had a choice of topics to study and 23 expressing that they had multiple options regarding evaluation.

Furthermore, the data from the traditional approach shows that a total of 65 individuals reported a capacity to work in groups, resulting in a percentage of 54.62%. In terms of organizational skills, 62 respondents indicated proficiency, reflecting a score of 52.10%. Time management skills were affirmed by 58 participants, accounting for 48.74%. Public speaking abilities were noted by 34 individuals, resulting in a percentage of 28.57%. Notably, knowledge of how to conduct research projects was reported by 83 respondents, leading to a significant score of 69.75%.

5.3a Transferable Skills Analysis (Group Project)

According to Table A found on page 58, a clear trend emerges when comparing the transferable skills students can obtain in SCL classes versus traditional approach classes. The two skills that students reported feeling the least comfortable with also showed the largest percentage differences, indicating that they perceived SCL to be more effective than traditional methods in those areas.

The first skill in which students reported discomfort is the ability to work in a group. This skill was noted to be much more prevalent in SCL classes, with 72.55% of students feeling comfortable, compared to only 54.62% in traditional classes. This represents a difference of 17.93%, suggesting that nearly 18% more students felt comfortable with group projects in SCL settings compared to traditional approaches.

This can be attributed to the overall structure of SCL, which is not based on individualism but rather on cooperation and the exchange between students within the class. It

may also be explained by the fact that SCL often allows students to work on projects that they hold dear to their hearts. This enables students with similar interests to group together for specific projects, rather than being forced to collaborate on topics they have less interest in.

Finally, group projects in SCL are often structured in a way that allows individuals to focus on their strengths while addressing their weaknesses. For example, if a group of students are working on a group project that requires an oral presentation but one of them is extremely shy, an individual might choose to concentrate on researching the project and gathering sources and information. Perhaps another one is more artistic and prefers working on the PowerPoint presentation, while someone else is very comfortable speaking in public and takes on the role of presenter. This flexibility in SCL often transforms what many students consider one of the worst parts of university into an enjoyable and valuable learning experience.

Tableau A.

Comparison of skills between SCL and TRAD with differences in percentages			
Skills	SCL	TRAD	Difference
Capacity to work in groups	72.55%	54.62%	17.93%
Organization skills	58.82%	52.10%	6.72%
Time management skills	54.90%	48.74%	6.16%
Capacity to speak in public	43.14%	28.57%	14.57%
Knowledge of how to conduct research projects	62.75%	69.75	-7.00%

5.3b Public Speaking

Students reported significantly higher appreciation for public speaking skills developed through SCL compared to traditional teaching methods. In SCL classes, 43.14% of students indicated they gained public speaking skills, while only 28.57% reported the same in traditional classes. This represents a gap of 14.57%. Furthermore, public speaking was identified as the skill students felt least comfortable with when asked about their overall comfort level with various skills (see Table B on page 60).

While many factors may explain why this is the case, it can be argued that a less competitive environment, combined with the idea that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process, allows students to feel more comfortable with public speaking and taking risks in general. Additionally, some traditional classes simply do not provide evaluations based on oral presentations. Traditional assessments often rely on quizzes, midterms, and final exams, whereas SCL typically employs a variety of evaluation methods, including group and individual projects followed by oral reports to the class. In some SCL environments, the class is structured more like a seminar, encouraging discussion and engagement with the readings and topics at hand. This format allows students to practice the public speaking skills they reported feeling least comfortable with.

Finally, SCL classes often encourage collaboration, while traditional approaches are more focused on individualism and competition. This structure can discourage students from interacting with one another, both inside and outside of the classroom. This observation is reinforced by students who attended CEGEP. According to two participants I interviewed, the experience of going through CEGEP generally better prepares students for university compared

to those who graduated high school and went directly to university. However, the structure of CEGEP, which emphasizes the R score, encourages students to outperform their classmates to achieve better scores. These scores ultimately determine the programs they can apply to when it's time for university applications.

All of this suggests that while traditional approaches to education do allow students to gain transferable skills in university, the SCL approach shows significant potential for improvement in at least two areas where students reported feeling uncomfortable and unprepared when starting their university journey.

Table B.

Scale of general comfort from one to ten regarding different skills at school.	
Skill	Comfort average
Working in group	62,9%
Organization skills	69,5%
Time management	64%
Public speaking	53,4%
Conducting research	72,6%

5.3c Research Skills.

While the majority of students reported obtaining higher levels of multiple skills in SCL, there is one category of students who reported obtaining a higher level of skill development in traditional classrooms. The only skill that obtained a higher percentage of response in the traditional approach compared to SCL was research skills for conducting their own research

projects (7% higher in the traditional approach). This may be because students did not associate conducting traditional research with an SCL approach. Additionally, this could be due to the fact that SCL offers students more choices in how they are evaluated, while the traditional approach tends to be more rigid and structured, often requiring students to complete one or more research projects within the class.

A comprehensive comparison of the percentage differences across all skills reveals that students' reception of transferable skills acquired in SCL classes is significantly more positive than in traditional classes. This discrepancy can be attributed to various factors previously discussed. Furthermore, this observation reinforces the initial argument that, although many students feel unprepared for the demands of university, an alternative educational structure like SCL may offer a more effective approach. By fostering collaboration and engagement, such a framework has the potential to enhance the educational experience for students from diverse backgrounds, ultimately leading to greater preparedness and confidence in their academic pursuits.

5.3d Average Grade Analysis

When looking at Table C, we can observe that the general average grades are higher in SCL than in traditional classes. While many different reasons may explain this, I believe it is linked to the skills students acquire while attending SCL classes, which reflects their overall grades. This has also been discussed during the interviews.

Tableau C.

Comparison of grade distribution between SCL and TRAD		
Grade	SCL	TRAD
A+ to A-	33/51 (64.71%)	36/119 (30.25%)
B+ to B-	18/51 (35.29%)	66/119 (55.46%)
C+ to C-	0/51 (0%)	17/119 (14.29%)

According to the interviews I conducted regarding the observed grades, students offered multiple reasons why they believed SCL resulted in higher grades than traditional approaches. However, the most common explanation provided by students for the higher grades in SCL is engagement. Five out of eleven students argued that engagement was the main reason for the observed improvement. As one student noted, “When you feel more engaged and it feels more personal, you tend to get better grades, in contrast to traditional exams, which often involve the depersonalization that happens in a lot of courses where you go, you write the exam, you leave, you’re a number, they have your student ID, [...] and in two weeks, we will let you know if you failed or passed the course.” This illustrates how the traditional approach tends to be less motivating and sometimes alienates students from their own learning experiences.

The first and most evident reason why engagement is the most common aspect of SCL leading to better grades is quite simple: the best way to learn something is to interact with it and have fun while doing so. The perception that school is boring and dull alienates students from their own playful nature. Students emphasized that making school enjoyable leads to better knowledge integration and a deeper understanding of the material.

Secondly, the enjoyment derived from active learning and participation allows for a deeper understanding of the material, as well as the development of transferable skills such as public speaking, skills that extend beyond mere academic pursuits. By being proactive in their learning, students gain multiple skills, rather than simply memorizing information to later write on a piece of paper. An interesting observation here is how a sense of well-being, more precisely, a sense of belonging can be experienced and influenced by university. A participant pointed out that SCL fosters a sense of belonging through interactions between students and teachers. This supportive environment motivates students to prepare and participate actively, contributing to their success.

Additionally, students expressed a sense of choice in the classroom that correlates with higher grades. One participant mentioned that being able to design personal projects increases motivation. When students can explore topics that matter to them, they are more likely to excel.

Students also reported a better comprehension of material compared to mere memorization. For example, one student highlighted that SCL focuses on comprehension, which is easier for students when they are engaged. Understanding the material rather than merely memorizing it leads to higher grades. This is reinforced by a work environment that encourages collaboration. The benefits of group participation and learning from peers were discussed by multiple students throughout my interviews. Collaborative environments allow students to engage with different perspectives, enhancing their understanding and retention of information.

Finally, a sense of accountability was noted by students during the interviews. Engagement in SCL holds students accountable, knowing they will be involved in discussions motivates them to come prepared, positively impacting their grades. This, in turn, encourages

critical thinking. This deeper level of engagement pushes students to work harder and better understand the material, resulting in improved grades.

There is no unique answer as to why we observe higher grades in SCL compared to traditional approaches. Some students mentioned that SCL is a great way to help them stay more interested in learning, but we must not reject traditional methods either. There is a need for reform, as one student noted that our current structure is archaic. However, we must not throw the baby out with the bathwater. We should look at the benefits that can be retained from traditional structures and integrate them into an SCL approach, or vice versa.

In the end, we see that SCL helps students achieve higher grades, but more importantly, the level of knowledge and comprehension that students obtain is greater in SCL. This is what schools should strive for, not just higher GPAs for the sake of a better reputation among other universities. Instead, we must focus on providing the best environment and methods for students to learn effectively while having fun. We need a structure that allows students to feel safe, included, and heard by both professors and their peers. As demonstrated here, SCL is a great way to achieve these goals.

5.4 Class Structure and What is Desired

When exploring the topic of Student-Centered Learning compared to traditional approaches, a common denominator can be identified in both methods. One is primarily structured as a lecture approach (traditional learning), while the other adopts a seminar format (Student-Centered Learning). While defining SCL simply as a seminar is reductive, as it encompasses a wide spectrum of methodologies, this comparison serves as a useful counterpart to the traditional approach. Therefore, I decided to contrast the two to better determine which

approach is appreciated most by students. As we will see, there is no clear distinction in student preferences, as the main response from the survey was that “it depends on the class.”

QUESTIONS:

- 1. Would you prefer taking lecture classes (Classes where you have a teacher with a PowerPoint presentation where you take notes, ask questions to the teacher and prepare for a mid-term and a final exam), or do you prefer seminars (a focused meeting where students discuss and learn about a specific topic, led by a facilitator and/or the teacher.)**
- 2. In light of the previous explanation regarding Student-Centered Learning compared to a more traditional approach, which one do you, or would you prefer?**

Starting off, my question focuses on preferences between lecture-based classes and seminar-style classes. Specifically, it asks whether participants preferred lecture classes, where a teacher presents information using PowerPoint, and students take notes, ask questions, and prepare for midterms and finals, or seminars, which involve focused discussions led by a facilitator or teacher on specific topics. The results show that the most common response was “it depends on the class,” with 46 out of 119 participants (39%). The second most common response was a preference for seminar structure, with 29 out of 119 participants (24%). Additionally, 22 out of 119 participants (18%) indicated they preferred a mix of both formats. Finally, 19 out of 119 participants (16%) preferred lecture classes, and 3 participants (3%) reported no preference.

Table D.

Preferences for teaching formats		
Preference	Total Responses	Percentage
Both	22	18%
It depends on the class	46	39%
Lecture Classes	19	16%
No preferences	3	3%
Seminars	29	24%
Grand Total	119	100%

When looking at what students commented when offered the option to explain why they chose to ‘It depends on the class’ the explanations varied greatly. Preferences for seminars or lectures vary based on subject matter, class size, and teaching style. For instance, seminars are favored for open-ended discussions in subjects like gender and society, allowing for deeper exploration, while lectures are preferred in objective courses like statistics, where memorization is key. A balance of both formats is ideal, as seen in performance art classes that thrive on creativity through seminars, whereas anthropology classes benefit from structured lectures on theories. Factors like student comfort and teacher engagement significantly influence the learning experience.

While these findings are interesting in themselves, it’s noteworthy to compare the number of students who preferred seminars (24%) to those who preferred lectures (16%). These figures indicate a clear preference for seminars, suggesting that, although students favour different

approaches depending on the class, there is a general inclination toward more interactive formats. Even among the students who mentioned they preferred both formats (18%), it highlights the appeal of the seminar style, as many may appreciate the engagement and depth that such classes offer. This trend underscores the importance of incorporating varied teaching methods to accommodate student preferences, ultimately enhancing the learning experience across different subjects.

The follow-up question of the survey asked students if they preferred an alternative approach to education, a traditional approach, or if they had no preferences. Surprisingly, 61% of students indicated a preference for an alternative approach, vastly outnumbering what we previously observed when comparing lectures and seminars. Less surprising was the fact that 28% had no preferences, emphasizing the idea of flexibility and the recognition that both approaches can be beneficial to student learning. Finally, only 12% of students mentioned they preferred the traditional approach. Once again, we see that student preferences regarding educational approaches tend to favor a balance between traditional and alternative methods. Ultimately, the key takeaway is that what students truly desire is flexibility in their learning experiences.

Table E.

Preference for teaching approaches		
Preference	Total Responses	Percentage
Alternative approach (Student-centered learning)	72	61%
No preferences	33	28%
Traditional approach	14	12%
Grand Total	119	100%

Students clearly value flexibility in their learning experiences. The survey results revealed significant variability in preferences based on class topics, with many students favouring seminars over lectures. This indicates a general inclination toward interactive formats that promote deeper engagement and discussion. Notably, a considerable portion of students indicated that their preference "depends on the class," highlighting the importance of context in determining effective teaching methods. Additionally, the desire for a mix of approaches suggests that students recognize the unique benefits of each teaching method. When it comes to overall educational approaches, a striking majority expressed a preference for alternative methods over traditional ones, reinforcing the idea that students are looking for innovative and flexible learning experiences. Finally, with a significant number of students reporting no preference, it's clear that flexibility and recognition of diverse learning styles are essential.

5.5 Opinion on Academia

One of the main reasons students cited for the varying depth of learning across classes was the level of the course. To better understand this, it's helpful to explain how courses are structured at Concordia. Undergraduate classes are divided into three levels: 200-level, 300-level, and 400-level courses.

200-level courses are typically introductory classes, such as *Introduction to Society* or *Introduction to Culture*. These courses tend to be more general and provide a broad overview of the subject matter. In contrast, 300-level courses cover more complex topics and generally require students to have completed certain 200-level courses beforehand. Finally, 400-level courses are the most advanced, often taught in smaller classes, and typically use more interactive teaching methods, such as seminars. This is in contrast to 200-level classes, which can have up to 200 students, making it harder to foster interaction and discussion.

In these large 200-level classes, professors often rely on teaching assistants (TAs) to help manage the course. TAs provide additional support, reviewing the material with students before or after class, helping them stay on top of the weekly content.

The size of the class and its level are key factors influencing the depth of learning. Five out of eleven students interviewed mentioned that 200-level courses, in particular, often offer more surface-level learning. This is partly due to the large class sizes, which make it difficult to engage in meaningful discussions. These introductory courses usually cover a wide range of theories and ideas in a short amount of time, sometimes just one week or a few readings followed by a three-hour class. As a result, students don't have enough time to engage deeply with each topic. Although these subjects may be revisited in more advanced 300- and 400-level classes,

many students feel they only skim the surface before moving on to the next topic. This lack of depth in 200-level courses can be discouraging, especially for students who want to explore certain topics more thoroughly.

With this context in mind, we now pass to another explanation for why students believe the depth of learning varies across classes, the quality of the professor or TA. Six out of eleven participants mentioned that the depth of understanding in a class largely depends on the teaching approach of the professor and the TA. For instance, one participant noticed a significant difference between a well-prepared and experienced professor compared to a younger, less experienced professor still "learning the ropes." Furthermore, some professors are deeply invested in their students' success, while others are more detached, often relying heavily on PowerPoint presentations and providing minimal engagement beyond answering occasional questions.

TAs, too, vary widely in terms of their ability to foster in-depth understanding. TAs are often graduate students (at the MA or PhD level) who may lack prior teaching experience or training. As a result, some TAs struggle to address complex questions, either because of a lack of knowledge or a lack of time. This inconsistency in teaching quality, both from professors and TA's, explains why many students reported that the level of understanding in their classes, ranging from surface-level to deep learning, varies widely.

Finally, another common factor mentioned by students is that they tend to go deeper into subjects they find personally interesting. Five out of eleven students mentioned that when they are genuinely engaged in a course, they go above and beyond to learn more about the topic. This might involve extra readings, asking more questions, and actively participating in class

discussions. In contrast, students who are less interested in the material often focus more on memorization and exam preparation, aiming to achieve good grades rather than seeking to understand the material for its own sake.

The number of mandatory courses versus electives also plays a role. Programs with more flexibility in course selection allow students to explore topics they are passionate about, leading to a higher level of engagement and understanding. In contrast, students in programs with rigid curricula may have to take courses that they find less interesting, which can result in more surface-level learning.

Other factors, raised by individual students, also influence the depth of understanding. One student mentioned how certain course structures, such as "pop-up quizzes," can motivate students to stay on top of their readings and engage more meaningfully with the material. Classroom discussions also help students gain a deeper understanding, as they learn not only from the material but also from the perspectives of their peers. Regular assignments and weekly exercises can reduce the stress of midterm or final exams, allowing students to focus on learning the material week by week, rather than cramming for a high-stakes test.

Feedback quality is another factor that students mentioned as influencing their understanding. Constructive feedback helps students identify what they did well and where they need to improve, which can support deeper learning.

Additionally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online learning was mentioned by some students. Online classes, while convenient, may reduce motivation and hinder interaction, affecting the depth of understanding. One student, in particular, noted that

returning to school later in life helped her develop better listening skills and a more effective approach to learning, leading to greater understanding with less effort.

Social pressures also play a role. Some students, particularly those who are attending university due to family or societal expectations, may not be as invested in learning for personal growth. As a result, they may focus on surface-level learning to achieve good grades, rather than engaging deeply with the material.

Finally, students outside responsibilities, such as work or family obligations, can impact their ability to dedicate time and energy to their studies. Students who work part-time or full-time, while also taking multiple courses, often need to be strategic in how they approach their studies. This can result in surface learning, as they simply don't have the time to dive deeply into the material.

In summary, the factors influencing the depth of learning in different courses are complex and multifaceted. While no simple solution exists, greater flexibility seems to be once again key. More flexibility in course selection, teaching methods, and evaluation schemes could help foster deeper understanding. However, external factors, such as work obligations and social pressures, are harder to address. Still, professors who show flexibility in deadlines and an understanding of students' individual needs can significantly improve the learning experience and encourage deeper engagement with the material.

5.6 Open Remarks of Students.

The final section of this analysis examines responses to an open-ended question from the online survey: "What changes would you like to see in class?" This section highlights key themes

from students' written feedback, providing insight into their preferences for improving their university experience.

Two key points emerged from the final question regarding education. The first is that 42 students expressed a desire for more well-organized discussions and participation/group activities (not group projects, but in-class activities designed to help students feel more comfortable engaging with the material and with one another). These activities would not be graded but would serve solely to deepen students' understanding. This aligns with other points raised by students, such as a need for more seminars (5 students), smaller classes (4 students), better classroom designs (1 student), a focus on students (2 students), and practice exercises (3 students). This demonstrates that many students desire a sense of community and prefer a more collaborative approach to learning, in contrast to the more competitive nature of current educational models.

Following this theme of collaboration, 7 students expressed a preference for a less competitive structure and/or a less punitive approach to grading. This highlights how universities currently foster competition instead of collaboration, something students would like to see change.

Secondly, 42 students mentioned a desire for more flexibility in university. This was expressed in various forms, ranging from flexibility in evaluations (having a say in how grades are distributed) to more choice in readings and subjects discussed in class (ensuring that topics align with students' interests and needs). Additionally, students sought less emphasis on memorization and more flexibility regarding deadlines. As one student summarized, "I would like to see more control on the part of students when it comes to what they will study. I dislike

the current model that essentially forces students to take a (what I consider excessive) number of elective and additional general education credits. While I think stepping outside of a narrow educational scope is beneficial, it can be frustrating that my graduation from a certain program will hinge on my completion of many courses that are wholly unrelated to my focus.”

Other concerns were also raised, such as the need for reduced financial pressure. As one student noted, “I think taking financial pressure off students should be the primary concern in terms of creating better learning environments. Being a poor student is the biggest obstacle to my academic well-being.” Additionally, some students expressed a preference for fewer PowerPoint presentations, while another student mentioned wanting fewer group projects. One final point raised was the desire for more feedback.

In conclusion, while two main themes emerged from this final analysis, it is important to recognize that not all students agree on the changes they wish to see in education. This diversity of opinion makes it challenging for policymakers to determine the best course of action.

6. Discussion.

6.1 Going back to the research question

Let us return to the research question of this thesis: How can alternative educational structures, such as Student-Centered Learning, address the diverse needs of students and reduce dropout rates while maintaining academic rigour, compared to traditional teaching methods? This question was explored in detail in the literature review, which examined the pros and cons of SCL. Many challenges may emerge in this shift, such as the role and knowledge required of teachers and the need for a paradigm shift in teaching approaches. However, the potential benefits of such a change were demonstrated on pages 19 to 23, particularly in terms of the real-

world relevance of what students are learning, which helps develop key transferable skills. This, in turn, increases motivation and engagement, making students more inclined to pursue their degree.

This shift, however, does come at the expense of teachers, who will require additional training and support, and it will demand students' adaptability. It is also a time-consuming process that requires significant resources. In the end, Sheeba Sardar Ali argues that while SCL and alternative methods offer significant benefits in fostering deeper learning and engagement, they also come with challenges. Finding a balance between the advantages of these methods and the limitations they present is crucial for successful implementation.

6.2 Main Insights

Based on the data collected, the literature review, and their relation to the research question mentioned above, these are the main insights observed throughout this thesis, along with the suggested implications for future research and potential academic reforms. I kept the following question in mind when writing this discussion: How does the data I observed speak to the larger question of alternative education?

The first main insight observed in this thesis is found on page 52. It looks at the complex nature of students' transition to university, emphasizing the need for tailored educational experiences, institutional support, and faculty guidance. A holistic approach that addresses academic, emotional, and practical preparedness, along with alternative educational methods, can better equip students and create a more inclusive and successful academic environment. This could be implemented in multiple ways by the university such as having a specific class or lesson on how to navigate university and how to get up to date with the new expectations of the university.

Secondly, on pages 53 to 56, we see how students' beliefs about SCL, along with their reflections on how it could address the needs of struggling students, show that they recognize flaws in the education system. They see SCL as a potential solution, especially given that many students are not adequately prepared for university. This also relates to the first point about providing a better introduction for students when they arrive at university. Offering a class or activity to help students navigate university would be beneficial. Additionally, implementing alternative approaches to classes, particularly during the early years of university, would allow students to choose their grading system, giving them a better experience by leveraging their strengths while gradually improving in areas where they struggle academically.

Thirdly, as seen on pages 62 and 63, a comparison of skills shows that students generally have a more positive reception to transferable skills learned in SCL classes compared to traditional ones. This supports the idea that, despite feeling unprepared for university, an alternative structure like SCL can be more effective. By promoting collaboration and engagement, SCL has the potential to improve the educational experience for diverse students, leading to better preparedness and confidence in their academic pursuits.

Fourth, when looking at the academic rigour on page 65, it is observed that there is no single reason for the higher grades observed in SCL compared to traditional methods. Some students find SCL more engaging, but traditional methods should not be discarded entirely. Reform is necessary, as one student described the current structure as outdated. However, we should not discard traditional methods entirely but instead integrate the benefits of both traditional and SCL approaches. This goes hand in hand with the idea that what academia needs is more flexibility all while also being understanding of students' situations inside and outside of university.

Following this same idea on page 65 and 66, SCL helps students achieve higher grades, but more importantly, it leads to a deeper level of knowledge and comprehension. Schools should prioritize this, rather than just aiming for higher GPAs to boost their reputation. The focus should be on creating the best environment and methods for students to learn effectively while enjoying the process. A structure that makes students feel safe, included, and heard by both professors and peers is essential. As shown, SCL is an effective way to achieve these goals.

In the end, the main insight that was taken from the whole of this thesis and its analysis is that students value flexibility in their learning experiences, with many preferring seminars over lectures. Preferences vary by class topic, highlighting the importance of context in choosing effective teaching methods. Many students prefer a mix of approaches, recognizing the benefits of each. However, the majority prefer alternative methods over traditional ones, emphasizing the need for innovative and flexible learning experiences that accommodate diverse learning styles.

6.3 Summary

Flexible learning is the key finding when discussing the best approach to education. Universities, as they are currently structured, still predominantly follow a traditional model, but we are seeing changes. Concordia University demonstrates that some professors use alternative approaches and that there is ongoing work to address students' evolving needs. This raises the question: Would the same observation be made at other universities? How would this analysis differ at a French university, for example? Additionally, how would the results vary if this study focused on STEM students or those in other fields besides the humanities? What about universities in different provinces? All these avenues could, and should, be explored in future research to better understand how alternative approaches can positively or negatively influence the academic journeys of students.

7. Limitation

An important limitation of this thesis is the scale of its ambition. As a pilot study, its goal is not to provide a comprehensive representation of all universities in Montreal but rather to reflect the opinions of Concordia students regarding alternative approaches to education. Additionally, as an MA thesis, I am still refining my research skills, which limits the scope of the study. Consequently, I adopted a focused data collection approach, aligning with the expectations of my program and the resources available. Due to this limitation, the sample size is relatively small compared to the target population.

Another issue emerged during data analysis: the gender distribution was skewed, with only 16.4% of male respondents. However, further research indicates that this mirrors the typical male-to-female ratio in humanities and social sciences programs (Stat Can, 2024) which were the programs my research focused on. While this could be viewed as a limitation, it simply reflects the higher enrollment of women in these fields. While the study aimed to explore students' opinions on alternative education approaches, generalizing these findings to all academic fields is difficult. The majority of respondents were from humanities programs, making it challenging to apply the results to disciplines like STEM. Some data could not be used due to space constraints in this MA thesis. Consequently, an additional section of the research was excluded to maintain focus on the core research question.

An additional limitation relates to the language of the survey. Language could have been a barrier, as 71 students reported English as their first language, while 48 indicated it was not. Although the survey was conducted at Concordia, an anglophone university, this research could have benefited from offering the survey in both of Canada's official languages, French and

English. In fact, 24 students indicated that their mother tongue was French. However, this limitation can be attributed to the fact that this is pilot research and my resources were limited.

Focusing on first-year students also restricted the age range of my sample. By exclusively targeting this group, the data represents only a small fraction of Concordia's student population. This limitation is even more significant when considering the broader academic context, as it excludes students from other year levels and age groups, potentially skewing the findings and reducing their generalizability.

Finally, after completing data collection, I would have streamlined the survey by reducing the number of questions. Specifically, I would have excluded sections that were not used in the research, making the survey more focused and efficient.

8. Conclusion

The current structure of university education is failing to adequately support students in their academic and personal development. Many students struggle with a lack of motivation, primarily because they are required to memorize large amounts of information without truly engaging with or understanding the material on a deeper level. This memorization approach does not encourage critical thinking or curiosity, which are essential for a fulfilling educational experience. Additionally, professors, many of whom are teaching with an educational background from a different era, may not fully grasp the extent of the challenges students face today. The modern university environment is vastly different from when many professors were students, and this generational gap creates a disconnect between faculty and students. As a result, students often find themselves unsupported in their academic journeys, and the underlying issues of the educational system are not effectively addressed.

The reality is that both professors and students acknowledge that a significant portion of the student body is unprepared for the rigours of university life. Despite this recognition, little is done to provide the necessary support to help these students succeed. This gap in preparedness leads to disengagement, frustration, and a feeling of isolation for many students, contributing to a broader sense of dissatisfaction with the educational experience. Moreover, as universities struggle to keep up with the changing demands of the modern world, the very relevance and importance of a traditional university education are increasingly called into question. The rise of social media, the constant stream of stimuli from digital platforms, the rise of online learning options, and ongoing socio-economic challenges have made the traditional university experience seem less appealing or even outdated for many students. The world of education is evolving rapidly, and universities must adapt in order to remain valuable to students.

Students themselves are increasingly seeking more than just a degree or job preparation from their university education. As observed through data analysis, education has shifted from being primarily about obtaining a job to being about personal growth, skill development, and lifelong learning. Today's students want to acquire transferable skills that can serve them not just in their careers but also in their broader life experiences. They seek education that provides them with tools to navigate the complexities of the modern world. However, many students feel as though they are only memorizing information for the purpose of passing exams and earning grades, rather than engaging in meaningful learning. This emphasis on grades over actual understanding leads to a sense of alienation from the learning process, leaving students feeling that the educational system is not meeting their deeper needs.

It is clear that universities must begin to focus more closely on what students truly want out of their educational journey. Rather than continuing to rely on outdated methods and

structures, there needs to be a shift in perspective. Education should be about fostering a deeper connection to learning, personal development, and the acquisition of skills that go beyond the classroom and the workforce. Universities need to become more aligned with the goals and needs of their students, rather than simply adhering to traditional educational models that no longer serve the students of today.

One promising approach to address these challenges is the exploration of alternative educational structures that emphasize flexibility and Student-Centered Learning. This approach allows for a more personalized experience, recognizing that each student has a unique way of learning, processing information, and navigating external factors such as personal and socio-economic challenges. In this framework, students can thrive by playing to their individual strengths, rather than being forced into a rigid and standardized system that may not align with their needs. Flexibility in education is crucial to help students overcome obstacles and achieve their academic and personal goals. By adopting these alternative models, universities can better support their students and help them succeed in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their lives.

In addition to adopting these alternative structures, further research is needed to better assess the goals and needs of students and to determine how Student-Centered learning approaches can contribute to achieving those goals. While there is growing interest in these alternative models, it is important to continue to evaluate their effectiveness and identify the best ways to implement them across diverse educational contexts. For now, it is clear that students and professors at Concordia University, along with many other institutions, believe that the traditional approach to education is no longer sufficient to meet the evolving needs of students. The time has come for universities to rethink their educational practices, focusing on flexibility,

student empowerment, and lifelong learning in order to better prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of the modern world.

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ANNEXE

Online Survey

Version 1. - Alternative Structures in Education - Student-Centered Learning

Attestation of consent PDF for: Questionnaire reviewed information and consent form Yannick Wajnberg

	Yes (1)	No (2)
Do you confirm that, at the time of participating in this project, you are 18 years old or above? (1)	☐	☐
Have you read the Information and consent form, and do you understand the purposes, risks and benefits associated with your participation in this questionnaire (2)	☐	☐
Do you accept to participate in this online survey? (4)	☐	☐
Do you agree that the information gathered in this questionnaire be used for the sole purpose of this research project? (5)	☐	☐
Do you agree to be contacted in the winter semester of 2024 to participate in a small group interview to discuss in more depth the topic of Student-Centered Learning? (6)	☐	☐
Are you interested in receiving a summary of the research project results? (7)	☐	☐

Section 1 **Alternative Structures in Education** **Student Centered Learning**

Section 1 : Introduction

Please take the time to read the following definition, for it is the basis of this research project and provides a definition of Student-Centered Learning (SCL) and alternative approaches to education.

Student-centered learning (SCL) is an educational approach that prioritizes students' active involvement in their own learning process and allows them to have a say in what material will be studied in class. It shifts away from the traditional teacher-centered model to focus on empowering students with personalized learning plans, collaborative activities, and opportunities for self-directed exploration. This approach accommodates diverse learning styles, encourages deep learning, and fosters critical thinking skills, preparing students for lifelong learning and success. This survey, conducted in the context of my master's thesis degree at Concordia, aims to enhance my comprehension of whether students perceive this approach as advantageous to their learning experience and to understand why they hold this point of view.

Q47 Here is an optional video which will further explain what is Student Centered Learning if needed.

Section 2

Section 2 : Personal information

Q1 What is your name and family name?

Q2 How old are you?

Q3 What is your Gender?

Q4 In what province or country did you complete high school?

Q5 How many university semesters have you completed?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

(45)



Q6 What is your average grade here at Concordia?

- ☐ A- to A+ (1)
- ☐ B- to B+ (2)
- ☐ C- to C+ (3)
- ☐ D- to D+ (4)
- ☐ F (5)

Q7 Is English your first language? If not, what is?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2) _____

Q8 Do you considerer yourself more of an extrovert or an introvert?

- ☐ Extrovert (1)
- ☐ Introvert (2)

Q9 On a scale of one to ten how comfortable are you at:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Speaking in public (1)										
Working in groups (2)										
Conducting your own research projects (5)										
Time management (7)										
Organization skills (8)										

Q10 Did you consider yourself ready and well equipped when you first started university?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Section 3

Section 3: Student Centered-Learning VS Traditional Approach

Q11 Have you ever heard about alternative approaches to education? If so, what do they mean to you? If not, what do you think is alternative approaches to education?

☐ Yes (1) _____

☐ No (2) _____

Q12 Student-centered learning (SCL) is an educational approach that prioritizes students' active involvement in their own learning process and allows them to have a say in what material will be studied in class. It shifts away from the traditional teacher-centered model to focus on empowering students with personalized learning plans, collaborative activities, and opportunities for self -

directed exploration. This approach accommodates diverse learning styles, encourages deep learning, and fosters critical thinking skills, preparing students for lifelong learning and success. Did you ever take a class which, based on the previous definition, you considered used an alternative approach to education?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

Display This Question:

If Student-centered learning (SCL) is an educational approach that prioritizes students' active invo... =
Yes

Q12 A What grade did you obtain in that class?

☐ A- to A+ (4)

☐ B- to B+ (5)

☐ C- to C+ (6)

☐ D- to D+ (7)

☐ F (8)

Display This Question:

If Student-centered learning (SCL) is an educational approach that prioritizes students' active invo... =
Yes

Q12 AA What are some transferable skills you have gained in an Student-Centered Learning class:

- ☐ Capacity to work in group (3)
- ☐ Capacity to speak in public (4)
- ☐ Knowledge on how to conduct research projects (5)
- ☐ Organizational skills (6)
- ☐ Time management skills (7)
- ☐ Other (8) _____

Display This Question:

If Student-centered learning (SCL) is an educational approach that prioritizes students' active invo... =
No

Q12 B If not, have you taken classes that included one or more of the following:

- ☐ Class discussion (1)
- ☐ Class activities (2)
- ☐ Class presentation (3)
- ☐ A choice of what topic to study (4)
- ☐ Multiple options regarding evaluation (5)

Q13 When discussing more **traditional education structures**, what grade do you receive on average?

- ☐ A- to A+ (1)
- ☐ B- to B+ (2)

☐ C- to C+ (3)

☐ D- to D+ (4)

☐ F (5)

Q14 What are some transferable skills you gained in a traditional class:

☐

Capacity to work in group (1)

☐

Capacity to speak in public (2)

☐

Knowledge on how to conduct research projects (3)

☐

Organization skills (4)

☐

Time management skills (5)

☐

Other (6) _____

Q15 Would you prefer taking **lecture classes** (Classes where you have a teacher with a PowerPoint presentation where you take notes, ask questions to the teacher and prepare for a mid-term and a

final exam), or do you prefer **seminars** (a focused meeting where students discuss and learn about a specific topic, led by a facilitator and/or the teacher.)

- ☐ Lecture Classes (1)
- ☐ Seminars (2)
- ☐ No preferences (4)
- ☐ Both (6)
- ☐ It depends on the class (5) _____

Q16 In light of the previous explanation regarding Student-Centered Learning compared to a more traditional approach, which one do you, or would you prefer?

- ☐ Traditional approach (4)
- ☐ Alternative approach (Student-centered learning) (5)
- ☐ No preferences (7)

Q17 Do you believe that universities effectively provide students with a comprehensive understanding of various topics, or do they primarily offer a superficial understanding?

- ☐ Yes, universities provides a In-depth comprehension (1)
- ☐ It varies, some courses offer depth, while others are superficial (4)
- ☐ No, universities typically offer only a superficial understanding (5)
- ☐ Undecided (2)

Q18 How significant do you perceive memorization to be, on a scale from one to ten, in terms of its role in your academic success?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1 (1)	
-------	-------------

Q19 How much do you feel you learn in school, based on the educational structure?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Traditional approach (1)	
Alternative approach (4)	

Section 4
Section 4 - Education in general

Q20 What are the biggest challenges you face regarding education?

Q21 What motivates you the most in university?

- ☐ My degree (1)
- ☐ What I learn (2)
- ☐ Social pressure (3)
- ☐ Sense of accomplishment (5)
- ☐ To get a job (6)
- ☐ Other (4) _____

Q22 How important is it for you to have a choice regarding the following?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Choice of topic seen in class (7)										
Choice of readings in a syllabus (12)										
Choice in evaluation methods (10)										
Choice regarding program curriculum (Elective vs mandatory classes) (11)										

Q23 Is emotional well-being after taking a class something you value?

- ☐ Yes (4)
- ☐ No (5)

Display This Question:

If Is emotional well-being after taking a class something you value? = Yes

Q23 A On the following scale, how does university influence your wellbeing? (-10 being the worst influence and 10 being the best influence)

- 9 -8 -7 -6 -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
10

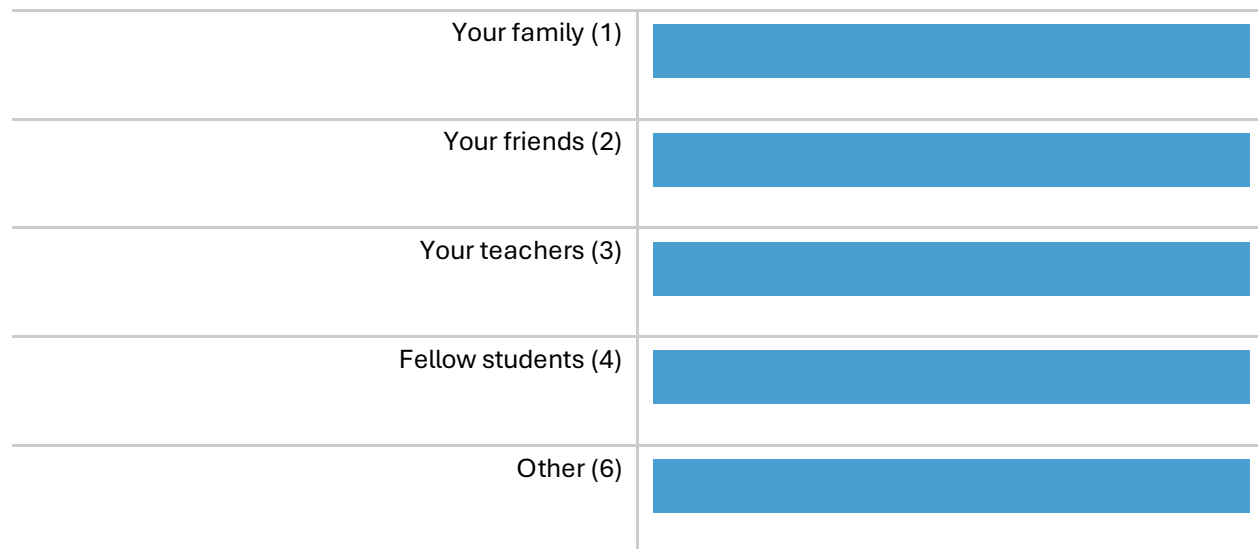
1 (1)	
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Q24 Which of the following environments maximizes your learning?

- ☐ Classes with activities (1)
- ☐ Classes with oral presentations (2)
- ☐ Classes with lectures (3)
- ☐ Classes with small group conversation (8)
- ☐ Online classes (5)
- ☐ Pre recorded online classes (6)
- ☐ Other (7) _____

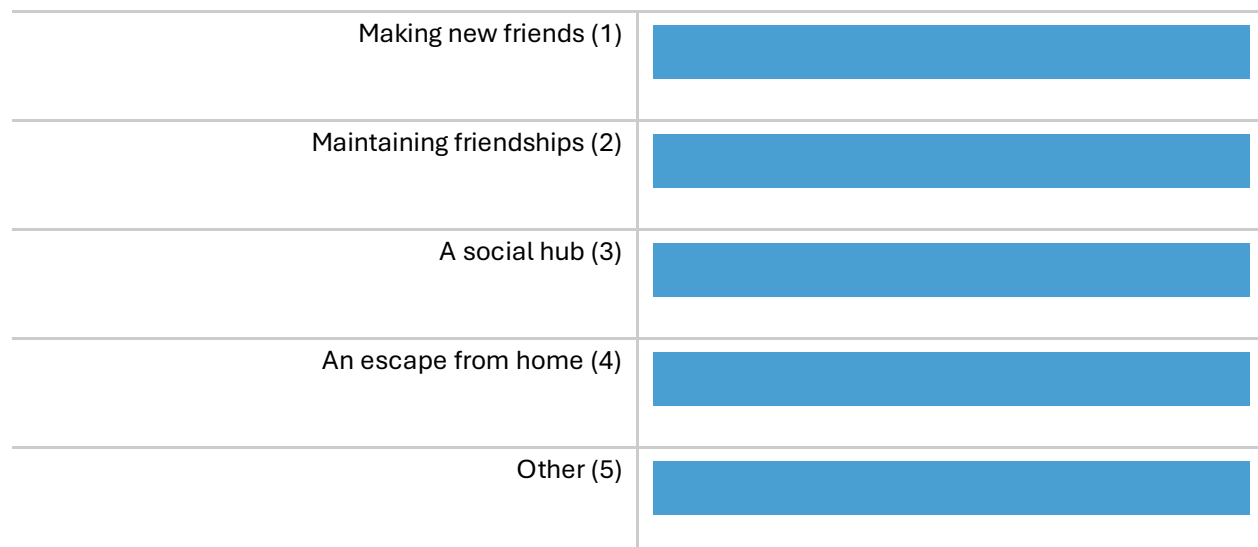
Q25 In regards to your academic journey, how much support do you get from:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Q26 To what extent is academia a place you associate with your social life?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Q27 Do you believe the current structure of education allows for healthy social relationships with peers, or would you prefer alternative structures for this purpose?

- ☐ As it is (1)
- ☐ Alternative approach (4)
- ☐ Other (5) _____

Q28 By having an alternative approach to the way we structure classes and programs, do you believe we can obtain a better quality of wellbeing in universities?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (4)

Section 5

Section 5: Additional information

Q29 What changes would you like to see in class after answering the previous questions?

Q30 Is there anything you would like to add about the topic of alternative approaches to education or Student-Centered Learning?

Q31 Would you like to participate in either group interviews or one-on-one interviews to discuss these issues further?

- ☐ Yes, group interview (1)
- ☐ Yes, one on one interview (2)
- ☐ No, thank you (3)

Interviews Questionnaire

Student Questionnaire

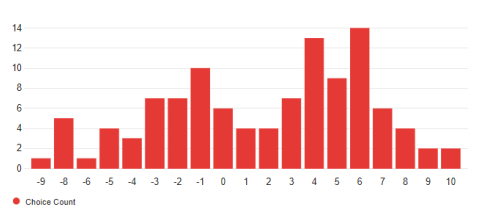
Hello, and thank you for taking the time with me today.

CONSENT FORM.

1. Have you read the consent form, and do you understand the purposes, risks and benefits associated with your participation in this interview?
2. Do you agree to have this interview recorded on audio tape?
3. Do you agree to confirm, on this audio recording, that you consent to participate?

Starting off strong.

1. Did you consider yourself ready and well-equipped when you first started university?
 - a. Results show 50-50.
 - b. Were you prepared for university? if so, why? If not, why not?
 - c. What would make you better prepared?
2. 93% of participants mentioned **that their level of comprehension of knowledge varies between classes.** (Some courses offer depth, while others are superficial).
 - a. Why do you believe that is?
 - b. What makes the difference between a class with in-depth comprehension or not?
 - c. Do you feel the higher your grade, the more knowledge you obtain?
3. Grades tend to be higher with student-centred learning than the traditional approach.
 - i. (A for SCL **VS** B for TRAD)
 - b. Why do you think that is?
 - c. To what extent does the SCL give you opportunities to get higher grades?
 - d. Given that grading is a way of giving you feedback, what kind of feedback works best for you in order to help you learn?
4. What is the role of collaboration in school?
 - a. Did you experience any forms of collaboration?
 - b. Did you bond with another student?
 - c. What is the role of competition?
 - d. How important are group participation and class discussion to you and why?
5. The distribution of students' well-being has been consistent throughout the survey. Where do you position yourself on this chart between -10 and 10 regarding how university influences your level of well-being?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Is there a particular aspect of the school which explains this position?
 - c. Has your well-being in university changed over time? And if so, why?



6. Deadlines.

a. How do deadlines impact your learning?

7. Do you prefer a structured or flexible **course outline?**

a. What would work best for you?

- i. What are the steps to work toward the completion of something?
- ii. Open freedom?
- iii. Multiple tasks?
- iv. Strict structure?
- v. One final exam?
- vi. Multiple assignments?

b. What is your experience about structure vs freedom balance.

Professors Questionnaire

Hello, and thank you for taking the time with me today.

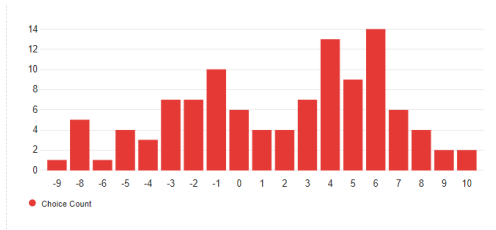
CONSENT FORM.

1. Have you read the consent form, and do you understand the purposes, risks and benefits associated with your participation in this interview?
2. Do you agree to have this interview recorded on audio tape?
3. Do you agree to confirm, on this audio recording, that you consent to participate?

Starting off strong.

1. Do you believe that students who come to university are well prepared?
 - a. Do you have a way of assessing if students are prepared for university?
 - b. How do you address these students who are not prepared?
 - c. Results show 50-50.
 - i. What do you think about this?
2. 93% of participants mentioned **that their level of comprehension of knowledge varies between classes.** (Some courses offer depth, while others are superficial).
 - a. Is your course designed to provide an overview of a specific topic or to have a deep dive into the material?
 - b. How do you approach class material in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the subject?
 - c. Based on your course goals, how do you design the assignments in your class to measure if those goals have been met?
 - d. Do you believe that our current grading system (for example, whether you got an A or a B) is the best way to provide feedback on students' understanding of class material?
 - i. Some teacher allows students to give themselves a grade, others use pass or fail, and others use percentages and letters. Do you have a preference?
3. Which do you prefer, the traditional approach to teaching vs. the alternative approach?
 - a. Do you use one or the other?
 - b. Why?
 - c. How?
 - d. Is it a balance of both?
 - e. What is your general opinion about the alternative structure of education?
 - i. SCL – Problem-based learning – Experiential learning.
4. What is the role of collaboration in school either inside or outside the classroom?
 - a. Are your classes structured in a way that encourages collaboration?
 - i. If so, how?
 - b. Do you have group participation and class discussion?
 - i. If so, how are they done, and why do you use this method?
 - c. In your opinion, what is the role of competition in academia?
5. The distribution of students' well-being (has a bell curve in the positive and negative) throughout the survey.

- a. Why do you believe that is?
 - i. One professor told me this is what the grade in the class looked like. Have you observed this, accessibilities, family issues, mental health, physical health?
- b. How do you structure your classes to take into account students' workload, courseload, socioeconomic structures, etc....
- c. Has your sense of well-being in university changed over time? And if so, why?



6. What is your take on deadlines? How do you approach them? Hard deadlines vs soft deadlines.
 - a. How do deadlines impact students' learning, in your opinion?
 - b. Why are you strick or not on deadlines?
7. Do your classes have flexible or structured course outlines?
 - a. Does your syllabus allow students to choose what will be seen in the class?
 - b. Do you offer multiple choices for evaluations?

Consent Form



INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM – INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Study Title: Alternative Structures in Education – Student-Centered Learning **Researcher:** Yannick Wajnberg

Researcher's Contact Information: Yannick.wajnberg@concordia.ca – 438 830 2894

Faculty Supervisor: Katja Neves

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: katja.neves@concordia.ca **Source of funding for the study:** Desjardin scholarships and Yannick Wajnberg.

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to study the opinions of students and teachers regarding alternative approaches to education and the results of implementing such methods. The goal is to better understand what students and teachers prefer when discussing educational structures. By doing so, I aim to deepen knowledge about what works and what does not, with the hope of challenging the current educational structure to make learning more interesting for students and teaching more engaging for educators.

B. PROCEDURES

The procedure of the individual interviews consists of online meetings conducted on Zoom. These interviews will be recorded and then transcribed to ensure the confidentiality of the participant and his or her answers. These interviews will last between thirty minutes to an hour and consist of semi-structured questions reflecting

on the questions found in the online survey. These interviews will take place in April. In these interviews, we will dive deeper into individuals' opinions regarding education structures, alternative structures of education, the role of well-being in school, memorization, and so on. All these topics will be the same as found in the online survey.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Participating in this research allows the scientific community to have additional empirical data on alternative education structures. Furthermore, if you decide to participate in the group interview, you will have a safe and confidential space to discuss your ideas, opinions, and beliefs about education and alternative education

structures.

There are no drawbacks regarding your participation other than a sacrifice of your time for a scientific research project.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research:

1. Grades
2. Age
3. Names
4. Gender
5. Country of origin
6. Personal opinions
7. Knowledge questions about teaching structures
8. Other alternative teaching methods information

We will not allow anyone to access the information except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.

The information gathered will be confidential, and no names or personal information will be publicized.

We will protect the information by:

1. Replacing all names with pseudonyms.
2. Having all the information protected by password.

We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results.

Page 2 of 3

Once data analysis is finished and my master's thesis is defended and approved, all information will be deleted and destroyed.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher before June 2024.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

There is a limited time a participant can withdraw his or her data from the research. 1 month after the data collection phase ends, which should be on April 30th, 2024, withdrawing the information will no longer be possible.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Emails sent to participants for the online survey

Email 1.

Student-Centered Survey by Yannick Wajnberg.

Hello again,

Thank you so much for participating in this project.

While your participation here may take no more than 10 to 15 minutes, it truly means the world to me!

Here is the link to the survey in question:

https://concordia.yu11.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3z3J51dQj0L0py6

You can complete this survey anytime on your phone, tablet, or computer.

You can also find the information and consent form attached to this email.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

You can reach me via this email address or by call or text message at 438-830-2894

Thank you again.

Email 2

Gentle Reminder: Student-Centered Survey

Hello again!

I hope this message finds you well. I wanted to remind you about the online survey for my master's thesis project. Your input is crucial for its success. While I understand we all have a very busy schedule, especially at this time of the semester, this survey will take no more than 15 minutes to complete, and it would truly mean the world to me if you found the time in the near future to complete it.

Please take a moment to complete it when you can. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to let me know.

Here is the link to the survey:

https://concordia.yu11.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3z3J51dQj0L0py6

Thank you again for your support.

Best regards,

Yannick. Wajnberg.

Email 3.

Research Survey Yannick Wajnberg Masters Research Project.

Hi, me again,

I am just sending another reminder of my online survey for my master's degree research project! Once again, what may take 10 to 15 minutes of your time would make a world of difference for me and my research project!

Here is the link to the survey:

https://concordia.yu11.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3z3J51dQj0L0py6

Thank you again, and I wish you all the best in your academic endeavours!

Email 4.

Reminder for Student-Centered Learning Survey

Hi again,

I hope you are doing well!

I just wanted to send a last reminder about the online survey regarding Student-Centered Learning. As mentioned in my previous email, it will take no more than 10 to 15 minutes to complete, and it would truly mean the world to me if you took the time during this strike week. Here is the link: https://concordia.yu11.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3z3J51dQj0L0py6
Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.
Thank you again.
Yannick.