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Cohort Communities in Higher Education: The Best Example of Adult Education

Paula A. Brooks
The University of Alberta Canada

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Abstract. Cohort groups facilitate relationships that encourage learning and act as a support for individuals. The underlying philosophy of a cohort is that learners become empowered and have a sense of ownership for their academic development. A sense of respect and collegiality were the most important outcomes and experiences in the cohort groups studied.

Cohorts facilitate relationships that encourage learning and are a supportive group for individuals. The underlying philosophy of a cohort is that learners become empowered and have a sense of ownership for their own professional development. Cohorts provide students with a greater feeling of inclusiveness, promote collaboration and enhance academic performance.

Barr and Tagg (1995) note there is a shift in paradigm occurring in education that puts more emphasis on a collaborative environment. The instructor's role is shifting from instruction to learning and empowering the learner. The emphasis is on the student taking responsibility for learning and the institution/instructor shifts from lecturing and talking to student learning. Therefore, the student, instructor and institution all become responsible for learning--and no one is in complete control of all the variables. The aim is to continually improve the quality of learning for students both as individuals and as group members.

Group dynamics are an integral aspect of learning cohorts. Although Barnett and Caffarella (1992) researched and reported the powerful ways of teaching diversity issues in cohorts, the four common components they identified for the integration of the adult learner characteristics are appropriate to the dynamics of most groups. They noted that: 1) the initial development activities help form bonds between group members; 2) the reflective seminars help integrate theory and practice; 3) learners developing individual learning plans/contracts assist the learner in maintaining their personal goals; and 4) post cohort involvement usually becomes a long term contact.

Instructional Strategies

Despite the increasing attention to cohort groups as an important method in the educational process, very little has been written on the instructional strategies that would best suit a cohort group. Cohort groups benefit from different instructional techniques more than other groups for a variety of reasons. First, the cohort group, because of its ongoing nature, requires little or no need for activities which try to foster initial group cohesion. In a cohort community, the cohesion of the group is already present, having been established in earlier activities and times of involvement (a developmental process). Many of the ice breaking activities used in a regular learning situation are not required. The ice breaking that is done at the beginning of a cohort community learning event would likely be more for the benefit of the instructor, assuming this person is new to the learners. It is important for the instructor to be aware of this and to plan activities which focus on moving the group into a performing stage at the beginning of the learning event, rather than into a forming stage.

Second, cohort communities have established a number of rituals and idiosyncrasies, such as jokes, specific to that group. This can work in two ways in the instructional process. On the positive side, these rituals, idiosyncrasies and expectations, if tapped, can move the instructional process along quite quickly and smoothly. The group is aware of the expectations and are well-socialized within the group. On the negative side, the group can become so demanding for the class to be run a certain way that a loss of flexibility can occur. In other words, the power of the group can

overwhelm and overpower the facilitator/instructor, and even a few students, such that the learning goals or tasks can be completely changed. This could be beneficial if the change enhances the learning of the members of the group. However, if the group does not comply with the tasks for less altruistic reasons (e.g., trying to reduce the workload of the experience for the sake of reducing the work demands rather than to improve the process), then the teaching-learning experience can be undermined.

If one agrees with the observation that "the central educational issues today hinge on social relations, not on cognitive ones: relations among persons, not relations between persons and things" (Bruffee, 1987), then the cohort community offers an exciting instructional challenge. When the relationships among the members of the learning group are well formed and these relationships are generally positive, the opportunity for collaborative learning is great. Assuming the status of a cohort community, however, tends to indicate by the very nature of the continuance of the members of the group, that the relationships are generally positive and effective. Otherwise, the membership in the cohort community would be self selecting. That is, those members of the cohort community who did not establish strong relationships with the other cohort members would likely withdraw from the community, either physically or psychologically.

In addition to the residential component for a cohort community, there must be teaching-learning strategies that focus on reflective seminars. This is a time for the participants to integrate theory and practice. The cohort communities would likely be able to greatly benefit from the reflective seminars because of their familiarity with the cohort members and their situations. Also, the more intimate nature of the relationships in a cohort community would enhance the trust, honesty, sharing and openness in a reflective seminar.

Individual learning opportunities must not be negated in a cohort community. Although there is a great deal of support, collegiality, and learning which occurs among cohort members, it is important to focus also on the goals and capabilities of individual learners. Recent research suggest that a cohort model influences some aspects of self-directed learning (Jenks, Haney, Clark, 1996; Johnson & Hill, 1996).

Research Design

Four cohort groups in the Adult and Higher Education outreach program from 1991-1996 were identified according to 3 phases depending on enrollment status in the program: early, middle, late. Three focus groups were conducted with representatives from each of these phases to identify key issues involved in cohort programming and learning. Using these data and information from a literature search, a questionnaire was developed to explore the issues for in-depth understanding. The survey was administered by mail in late 1996 and early 1997. Approximately 175 questionnaires were distributed; 51 usable ones comprise the sample.

The questionnaire had two parts that asked about influence the cohort had on student learning experiences and a rating scale of agreement with aspects of the cohort. Six open ended questions were asked to give students an opportunity to offer comments. These questions related to what they liked best, liked least, words they would use to describe the cohort experience, and how the program could be improved the beginning, middle, and end of a cohort model.

Demographic data were collected. There were 46% women and 54% men in the study. The ages ranged from the early 30s to the late 50s, with the majority being 40-49 years of age. These were adult learners with the normal commitments and responsibilities outside the classroom, so many of the responses about support, belonging, collaboration are understandable given the motivation of these learners for academic and work related learning, the needs for affiliation, and the importance of respect.

Discussion

As can be seen in the Tables, the cohort had a positive influence on most students on most of the variables typical to cohort groupings. The strongest influence was a sense of respect among learners. This is important in adult education and the types of learners these are: mostly postsecondary instructors whose professional lives do not facilitate interaction across teaching areas. All of the groups in the study are from large institutions spread out over a

large geographical area, sometimes with several sites. The cohort program was one of the few opportunities these educators/trainers had to meet and interact with their colleagues. And over the course of a 2 or 3 year outreach program, many professional benefits from this interaction were reported.

The support learners gave each other was very strong, even to the point of time and assistance when one could not get homework done, go to the library, or find the energy to attend a class. A few students commented that they sometimes felt pressure to enroll in the next course so as not to let their colleagues down (a cohort program has to have a certain number of students to be offered off campus). Cohort groups seem to be committed to discovering conditions that bring out and support human learning and to providing these conditions. Simultaneously, students and faculty will also wrestle with the questions of how much time to devote to the cohort, how much they wish to yield in terms of individual needs and schedules, and how hard they wish to push connections with the material and with each other.

Table 1: The Amount of Influence the Cohort Has on Learning Experiences

Influence of the cohort for you regarding:	not much %	some %	a great deal %
• mutual respect among learners	2	26	73
• a desire to want to learn more	8	26	67
• the importance of support for learning	12	24	65
• a sense of belonging to a learning community	14	24	62
• an enriching learning experience	10	29	61
• mutual respect between instructor & learners	6	34	60
• new perspectives on my learning style & needs	12	33	55
• engagement in collaborative learning	10	41	49
• improving critical judgment	18	33	49
• my teaching practices	14	41	45
• understanding relevant resources	8	56	36
• improving my leadership skills and abilities	16	51	33
• making connections in & across courses	16	51	33
• improving my self-confidence	22	47	31
• handling stress about the courses	16	53	31
• my ability to work independently	24	47	29

	D	SD	A	SA
• my study practices	31	45	24	
• my computer literacy	45	41	14	
• improving conflict-resolution skills	31	57	12	

Students were asked to rate their agreement with aspects of the cohort, and as can be seen in Table 2, again these aspects were rated highly. Respect in the cohort was again the most beneficial aspect, with a sense of belonging and support important.

Table 2: Agreement With Aspects of the Cohort

	D	SD	A	SA
Aspects of the cohort:	%	%	%	%
• I feel respected by others in my cohort	-	-	72	28
• Learning with the same group is beneficial	2	4	65	29
• New members welcomed to support groups	2	4	79	15
• I respect all students in my cohort	-	8	57	35
• I felt a sense of belonging to the larger group	2	8	47	43
• I see myself as integral to learning community	-	12	65	24
• Small groups contributed to cohesiveness	4	12	52	32
• I established a small support group within the larger group	2	22	42	35
• My small support group contributed to my success in the courses	8	16	52	24
• Group work helpful in completing	8	18	53	22

assignments				
• Learning with same group has disadvantages	6	39	49	6
• I sometimes felt pressure to take on more academic work than I normally would	22	29	41	8
• I initiated some professional development	14	42	34	10
• There was often competition in our cohort	16	46	30	8
• There are cliques that hamper group cohesion	26	46	14	6
• I felt excluded sometimes in class activities	32	58	10	-

Cohorts provide students with a greater feeling of inclusiveness, promote collaboration, and enhance academic performance. This is especially critical when students are at a distance from the host institution, and instructors and traditional support systems and services are unavailable. For students in the University of Alberta outreach programs, the cohort model provides all the usual aspects of an academic community: culture, interaction, support, assistance, colleagues, resources, and a sense of affiliation and belonging to each other, to the university, to the department or program, and to the field of study. The classroom (and beyond) becomes an interdependent community.

Summary

Adults have much to gain when they enter into a community of learners. Cohort groups stimulate both students and teachers. In true community fashion, the collaborative learning process models what it means to question, learn, and understand in concert with others. Learning collaboratively demands responsibility, persistence, and sensitivity. But the result can be a community of learners in which everyone is welcome to join, share, grow, and learn--an exemplar model of adult education.

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