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Designing a Progressive Model of Cohort-Based Programming

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Abstract: This research identified how faculty were able to use a progressive model of cohort-based programming to intentionally increase the success of underrepresented student groups in higher education (*Cunningham, P. 1994, 1996, 2003*). In addition the essences of the model are detailed.

Introduction

This study was designed to investigate the subjective reality embraced by the faculty leadership in the department of Leadership and Educational Policy (LEPS) at Northern Illinois University (NIU) as it pertains to access for marginalized students. Secondly, this study looked at how the Adult and Continuing Education Program (ACE) developed a progressive agenda. Moreover, how innovative leadership was utilized to institute pockets of resistance to the dominant ideologies of the academy.

Interviews were held with the faculty leadership and administrators who participated in the LEPS programs during the 1970s to 1998. Archival documents and records were researched to look at access and graduation rates during this time period.

In addition the documents and interviews were used to look at one of the most effective vehicles of bringing in African-American and Latino students which was cohort-based programs. Furthermore, the efficacies of these cohorts programs were investigated.

The results of the study found that the progressive agenda delivered through outreach utilizing a cohort format were effective in providing marginalized students access into and completion of graduate degree programs. The study outlined how the leaders of the NIU cohorts took their practice to the urban area of Chicago and in so doing they made many friends and many detractors. Research showed that the impact and reaction of the academy took on the sibilance of hegemony and in the minds of some of the participants it bordered on the brink of institutional racism.

This research touched on how cohort based educational practices can be utilized to foster praxis and democracy in an academic setting and how tenuous that praxis can be if unguarded.

Moreover, this research identified three types of cohort-based programming models. It is posited that two of the models tend to work to maintain the status quo. The other is a model that has and can be utilized by faculty and institutions to intentionally increase the success of underrepresented student groups in higher education.

In looking at the cohort programming it becomes important to be able to discern what are the different activities or essentials that make a progressive cohort different from traditional adult education programs or a non-progressive cohort program. Table #1 is a conceptual matrix with the characteristics of the three programming areas identified. This theoretical construct is designed to

be inclusive not exclusive. Therefore, it acknowledges that although many of the characteristics are included in the matrix, there are others that should be included but were not identified during this study.

Table 1

Cohort Matrix

	Progressive Agenda	Traditional Graduate Program	Non-Progressive Cohort
Students	Purposefully diverse	Non diverse agenda	Non diverse agenda
Faculty	Cultural, Race, Gender conscious	Race blind, gender sensitive, cultural aware	Race neutral, gender sensitive, culture conscious
Access	Open	Merit Based	Financial affiliation
Theoretical Orientation	Interpersonal	Scientific	Positivistic
Knowledge Base	Critical/Culturally relevant	Canon/Dominant	Canon/Human Resource/Dominant
Knowledge Construction	Constructivist/ Collaborative	Individual	Team building, learning community
Venue	Community of learners	University	Host site
Time to Completion	Within contract with Individual/ open at ABD	Open to Individual	Within time specified in contract with facility
Support for Retention	High	Low	Medium
Interpersonal Dynamics	High cultural relevance	Disconnected	Medium Professional Distance
Power Relationships	Shared	Instructorcentric	Instructorcentric/ some professional agency
Agenda	Urban, race, and class	Reproduction of status quo	Human Resource Development
Political	Democratizing	Hegemony	Hegemony
Faculty Guidance	Intervention & Advocacy	Individual/ confrontational	Group

In this model the functions are grouped together as spheres for conceptualizing building the program. Making space is the starting point of the model. Each subsequent component is interlocked with making space. The core category upon which the theory is conceptualized is faculty *conscientizacao* (Freire,1996). It is this core intentionality of the faculty developing the cohort that drives the model.

The Progressive Model

The matrix provides an explanatory function that could be used to inform the objective(s) more than the process the faculty used in putting together the cohorts. The matrix is functionally instructional, as it identifies sets of concepts that can be part of the curriculum development process. It also offers a set of characteristics in a traditional and non-progressive cohort that are distinctively different from the progressive cohort program.

It is important to remember that the model in figure #1 is used as an intentionality identifier to drive action. That is, it is the intent of the faculty to include or exclude the characteristics described in their instruction and design of their programs. Therefore these characteristics need to be worked out prior to the beginning of the cohort. The major premise in designing the program is comprised of the core faculty conscientizacao interacting with the starting point of making space. This conscientizacao is saturated throughout the model in application and in practice is apparent on the domains of intellectual, personal, spatial and ideological actions. Faculty student interaction is purposefully group-centered with the students' personal narratives as legitimate subjective foils of knowledge.

Definitions of the Characteristics

Core Category

The faculty became aware of their own *conscientizacao* in the late seventies when they were working and learning in the Service Center in Chicago, IL. They learned to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1996, Preface). This awareness became heightened once they were involved in working with the cohorts and intentionally striving to combat what they perceived as oppressive elements in the academy. The *conscientizacao* had transformed the faculty into Subjects rather than objects of the academy. This facilitated their becoming increasingly more critical. However, not being “fanatics” they chose the path of utilizing their positions within the academy to become radical extension educators. They worked to use the dominant discourses of language, capital and power to open access to marginalized groups and once the students were in, the faculty shared and engaged with them the dialogue of becoming more human. This is what must drive the progressive cohort programming. Not the technique, but the heart of the educator. It is a bold act of hope and love for humanity. It can also be a dangerous act. As a faculty attempts to share with students methods of raising their own *conscientizacao*, there are many in a capitalistic, materialistic, individualized society who do not want the experience. Many students simply desire to obtain their degrees and become functional within our society. I now turn to the sub-categories.

Making Space Time and Place

Faculty: Faculty has to see the intersection of culture, race and gender as a prism through which to see the world in the eyes of their students. Assumptions need to be identified early in the program to challenge “blind” or “neutral” mentalities that work to maintain the status quo. Faculty will also have to think systemically on how using a cohort will impact the academic system within which they work. Issues to be identified include: work load, diversity of thought, dealing with non-cohort faculty and students.

Venue: Location in time and space is important to marginalized students. When possible the courses should be delivered in the communities where the students reside. Taking the course

to the student overcomes institutional barriers on several levels. These barriers include real and perceived financial and emotional issues. Time constraints are also minimized due to less travel time.

Access: Access takes on an inclusive strengths base point of reference. Student applicants are viewed as having the necessary skills, and academic qualities to be successful in graduate school. Faculty look for individual students' strengths and help build on those attributes. Barriers such as entrance tests, past GPA are taken into consideration but not given the usual weight in traditional programs.

Ideological Space

Students: Purposefully diverse identifies an intention by the faculty to have a diverse student body through a place-based recruitment process. Once the venue of the program has been identified then arrangements need to be made in locating a guide to the location. This guide needs to be either an educator who is familiar with the diverse student body in the target area or a member of the target area. Marginalized students are not located in the center; they need to be identified in the margins where they work and live.

Knowledge Construction: The construction of knowledge is a sociopolitical act. This act involves both the deconstruction of current knowledge through a dialogue of power, gender, race and place including uncritical assumptions held by cohort members; and a reconstruction of knowledge based on the social interactions of the collaborative through dialogue. The deconstruction is usually the easier of the two actions. To be effective in the reconstruction requires an understanding of the possibilities that are to replace that which was cognitively destroyed.

Political: The political mandate of the cohort is to democratize the academic and social existence of the cohort participants. In this manner the students are encouraged to take political action in situations where social injustice is discovered. A very critical and political cohort may initiate a newsletter or other activist activity.

Curriculum

Agenda: The stated and explicit agenda of the cohort is to define and address issues of race, urban existence and class. There is also an agenda item to add praxis to the students' activities and understanding of their world. Students are encouraged to take political actions in the form of their public writing, thesis and dissertations.

Knowledge Base: The knowledge base is inclusive of cultural voices and critical writers and researchers. Authorities are taken from Native American, African American, Latino American, and international writers, as well as writers of varying genders, sexual orientations, and religions. Also, included are authors who critique these authors. The thinkers from the margins are migrated to the center.

Retention

Theoretical Orientation: Collaborative social construction of knowledge is the starting point for the theoretical orientation of the faculty looking to develop a progressive agenda cohort. The faculty takes a “guide on the side approach.” Faculty must also be aware that developmentally many students new to a progressive agenda will resist the format and desire a “sage on the stage” instructor- led classroom.

Power Relationships: Faculty should display a willingness to share power with the cohort. There should be no illusion that the faculty member is giving up her/his position of power rather that the cohort also has a power base and as a group they can build upon this base. Power is a commodity that in a progressive cohort program is focused outwards from the classroom into society rather than focused inward towards and against the classroom.

Interpersonal Dynamics: High cultural relevance involves encouraging students to develop friendships through class activities. This leads to breaking down interpersonal barriers to ideological change. During the course work students’ assumptions will be challenged. These challenges will be to deeply held beliefs on race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender. Victimization of dominant-class individuals needs to be guarded against, as is marginalized individuals taking the victim stance position. The tone of the class has to always be for truth through open dialogue and sharing.

Completion

Faculty Guidance: Faculty guidance takes shape as the faculties are advocates for the students in opposition to the academy when necessary. Faculty can intervene to assist students in financial matters such as obtaining scholarships, or arranging alternative payment plans through the cohort model. Faculty act as advocates to make space for the intellectual diversity of a student’s theses or dissertation that may be outside the mainstream of the canons of the academy.

Support for Retention: In addition to the issues of finances listed above, faculty maintains electronic connections with students to problem solve retention issues. To aid in retention faculty are encouraged to initiate a Live Poets Society for students entering the ABD stage of their program.

Time to Completion: Time to completion for students may be up to 20% to 30% more than for non-marginalized students. Additional time completion barriers include: family demands, especially if student is a parent and is the only provider. Students may have to make a choice between continuing a course or paying for needed family resources. Coupled with this is that once a student begins taking the dissertation courses they have to continue to take the dissertation class each semester until completion. This causes as psychological and financial problems if money is an issue. If the student does not sign up for one semester then it is likely he/she will skip additional semesters and accept a passive drop-out without notifying his or her dissertation

director. Faculty is encouraged to contact students who are not registered for more than one consecutive dissertation course. In opposition to the above characteristics a progressive cohort faculty member could test their topic against the foils of the non-progressive cohort or the traditional program and determine how progressive their course is. Once this is determined and if the desire is to increase the progressiveness of the course, critical and other progressive topics can be infused into the curriculum. The more radical and progressive the faculty designs each component of the instructional environment the more radical will be the desired cohort.

Findings

These numbers show the high marginalized student rate and a high completion rate of 72% for the cohorts. This can be contrasted with a historical completion rate of approx. 50% for graduate programs (Cunningham, 1996).

Table 2 *Total Cohort Completion (up to 1995)*

Admitted	Marginalized	Completion & Rate
261	190	73%
		189
		72%

(Cunningham & Shim, 2003, p.7)

Using a progressive cohort model had a stronger retention and graduation rate. Starting in 1988, and for a 6 to 8 year period, as compared to the ten year period utilized for the traditional students, the cohorts have the following graduation and retention rates as displayed in Table# 3 below. Table 3.

Doctoral Graduation Rates

(May, 1996) Doctoral Cohort Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity							
Cohort	#years	Dropped	European	African	Latino/Asian	Native	
Alpha	8	3	68%	100%	100%	----	----
Omega	8	5	66%	55%	44%	---	---
CC	6	7	60%	42%	---	---	100%
Total	---	15	66%	52%	47%	0%	100%

(Reproduced from Cunningham and Shim, 2003)

*Fifteen of the original 102 students admitted to the cohorts did not finish the course work (15%) as compared to 21% drop-out from the traditional doctoral program.