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An Adult Cohort Success Model Proposal: From Crying Shame Governance toward Collaborative Community

Soni Simpson

Wendy Yanow

Tania Giordani

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Soni Simpson, Elmhurst College
Wendy Yanow, DePaul University
Tania Giordani, College of Lake County

Abstract: This exploratory study compares governance efficacy in two adult graduate program cohorts to understand whether the introduction of skill development within the curriculum might be beneficial in learning to manage shared governance. A *Cohort Governance Curriculum Model* is introduced.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this *exploratory* study was to understand whether the introduction of interpersonal and group decision-making training at the introduction of an adult cohort program had an impact on governance efficacy.

Additionally, in comparing results from two cohorts, this preliminary study reflects upon a suggested model that might assist in increasing cohort group dynamics over time.

Background

Included in this cohort program was an opportunity to experience the building of a democratic process by working within a governance process. The process was often referred to as self-governance in that it included no input from faculty but might have more accurately been referred to as shared governance in that it was used to inform faculty of the needs and wishes of the cohort but had no decision-making authority.

David Beetham defines democracy as "a mode of decision-making about collectively-binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control, and the most democratic arrangement to be that where all members of the collectivity enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision-making directly" (Archibugi, 1998, p. 199). This statement describes the intent of governance in the graduate program.

As a way to have graduate students of this program grapple with democracy, everyone was introduced to governance and models of democracy through course readings, and class discussions during the first semester. Governance was an integral part of this graduate program inviting students to voice their opinions and influence certain aspects of their program such as curriculum and class scheduling. Students were expected to engage in governance each semester throughout the duration of their program. Over the successions of cohorts, it became apparent that students primarily struggled with effective communication skills and decision making. Ramdeholl, Giordani, Heaney, and Yanow (2010) write "Democracy is a complex system of decision making that is too often uncritically embraced without acknowledging its complexity" (p.60). As a result, faculty began to revise the curriculum by adding materials that would

provide students with a foundation in the following areas: effective communication skills, decision making and conflict resolution.

Research Design

This initial study includes a comparative analysis of two cohorts (Cohort A and Cohort B) in a graduate program at a university in the United States. At the completion of Cohort A, feedback received suggested discomfort with the governance process which was then addressed by adding content to Cohort B. These cohorts took place a little more than 2 years apart. Data collection included:

- Syllabi and course materials from the cohorts' introductory programs
- Analysis of group list-serve content over time
- Survey with a Likert scale among members of each cohort group
- Observations

The means of analysis included cluster techniques to identify key themes, narrative analysis of the above data and content analysis.

Curriculum Findings

In comparing the introductory programs of both cohorts, although the syllabi were similar, the course content delivered was different. Based on organization development theory, for Cohort B, faculty added specific content related to group dynamics, communication, consensus building as well as conflict management skill awareness and development to assist in creating a working governance process.

After experiencing the new content in the first term, Cohort B members chose to change the name of their governance sessions to "community" in order to emphasize the community building aspect of their sessions and de-emphasize the negative aspects they perceived of governance. Thus, they "met for community" or had "community meetings" versus "governance meetings". Additionally, Cohort B developed a type of "All for one" team circle cheer with which they stood together to closed their sessions. In this way, they appeared to be emphasizing a more collective and inclusive approach to governance.

In contrast, Cohort A appeared to experience discord from their first governance meeting when one member of the cohort chose to defiantly write "governance sucks" on a flipchart within the first few minutes of their initial meeting. Similar comments in the first semester lead us to question Cohort's A investment in governance. In a study that researched individualism and collectivism role of goal orientation, participants' investment in the process was a key indicator of whether they would transfer what they learn when faced with the situation in real life (Rogers and Spitzmueller, 2009). Cohort A found decision-making difficult from the beginning. As example, one member cited that the group had no accessible methods to assist them in consensus building around simple decisions such as "whether to attend a party being hosted by another cohort."

Observationally, it appeared that the introduction of interpersonal and group decision-making content had a positive impact on group efficacy and governance agency for Cohort B in comparison to the governance experience Cohort A.

Public List Serve Content Analysis Results

An additional data set analyzed for the purposes of this study was the list serve utilized by each cohort program. This included reviewing the content of 890 emails from Cohort A and 327 emails from Cohort B. In reviewing the list serve content of both cohorts, the following comparisons were made:

- *List Serve Etiquette*: Cohort A requested a separate list serve so members could discuss governance issues without disturbing faculty. Discussion often began collegially with students helping each other out and sometimes led to contentiousness. It seems that this removed a "respectful check and balance" as members did not need to be mindful that their faculty might be observing communication dynamics among members in disagreement. Cohort B's list serve, which included faculty, appeared to be much more mindful of list-serve etiquette and collegiality.
- *Major Conflict Example:* The first major conflict discussed on the list serve for Cohort A was six months following the program introduction when a decision needed to be made. There was a disagreement that resulted in feelings. In contrast, the first major conflict Cohort B reflected in list serve was 16 months following their program introduction. An open dialogue between students and faculty took place over the list serve in an attempt to constructively solve the issue.

Lastly, it was noted that unlike Cohort A, Cohort B consciously chose to socialize as a group outside of class throughout the school year. Much of their list serve conversation centered upon this aspect.

Cohort Survey Results

Initially, and in surface observations throughout the two cohorts, it appeared that Cohort B had a "more successful" governance experience than Cohort A. Ironically, anonymous survey results provide a different conclusion.

The two cohorts were provided an identical survey that included Likert type scale questions regarding governance, communication, group decision-making and conflict management tools provided through the cohort curriculum. The participants were asked to respond to whether each tool was introduced as follows (In Likert fashion): In a specific class or module taught to the entire cohort; Specific readings provided and discussed; Information discussions held with faculty; Informal discussions held with cohort members; Specific practical tools; methods or frameworks provided (e.g. role play, decision methods, self-assessments, etc.); Not introduced in the cohort curriculum; Do not recall or do not know.

The survey followed with open-ended questions asking the following:
1. In your own words, describe How did the model of governance hinder or foster a democratic process (and why)?
2. What did you learn regarding the relationship of governance, the cohort model and adult education?
3. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the governance process in your cohort?

The survey responses, specifically for Cohort A were at times contradictory while Cohort B, which had a significantly higher return rate than Cohort A, seemed more consistent. For Cohort A, responses about what they had learned were much less consistent with few recognizing some content in areas such as group formation, intercultural communication, empowerment and agency, while many more recognized content in antiracism and other "isms." From Cohort B, significant numbers of respondents indicated recognition of the inclusion in the curriculum of general content reflecting skills necessary for governance.

With respect to the more specific communication, group decision-making and conflict management skills, the results were more focused. Respondents from the earlier cohort indicated that either the skills were not introduced in the curriculum or they were addressed in informal conversations with faculty and/or student colleagues.

For the same set of specific skills, the second cohort also responded in a somewhat different but equally consistent manner. Respondents indicated in fairly equal numbers that the skills were introduced through focused curriculum and/or readings or that they either were not introduced or were not remembered.

The narrative responses to the questions added some clarification. While there was some indication that the intentional addition to the curriculum of knowledge, skills and/or attitudes necessary for governance may have had an impact on student experience, it later become clear that the addition of the skills, knowledge and attitudes did not necessarily contribute to the overall experience of the cohort members with respect to governance.

When asked whether the model of governance either hindered or fostered a democratic process, respondents from the Cohort A added comments such as,

> *"I learned that democracy is really hard. In this way it was a successful experiment. It is harder when people are not trained in how to collaborate…respect and understand differences, manage conflict etc. People…look out for themselves and group with like-minded people…."*

> *"…it definitely fostered a democratic process but there were always competing interests and so various folks came into program with different levels of understanding…"*

> *"…Process was painful and though we all learned from the struggle, it was detrimental to the program."*

From Cohort B responding to the same question, comments included:

> *"The model of self-governance fostered the democratic process, because we came to learn that people use different ways of communication both verbal and nonverbal."*

> *…It's a perfect model of the real world, the world the cohort claims to want to change."*
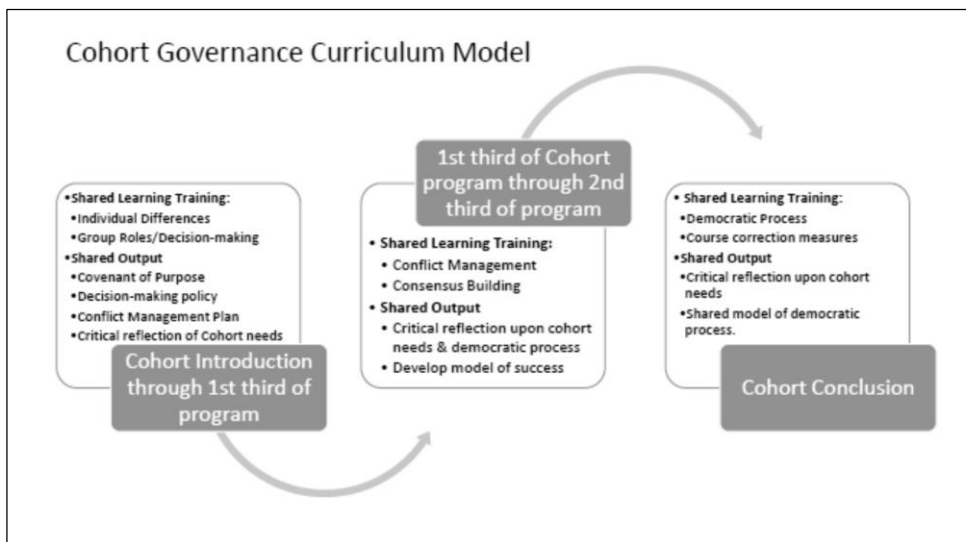
> *"The model itself fostered a democratic process in that it insisted the students engage in discussion of democracy."*

Thus, the anonymous survey results indicate that there were continued issues managing the governance process in both cohorts and that the introductory training in Cohort B had little long term impact upon group efficacy in terms of shared governance.

Conclusion

It must be emphasized that this exploratory study is preliminary in nature only. The authors conclude the following:

- Faculty presence in cohort dialogue is, most likely, a positive impact in online etiquette and online conflict management.
- Introduction of skill development within the curriculum might be beneficial in learning to manage shared governance. However, introduction of these tools at the beginning of a program is not sufficient.
- "Governance models need to be responsive to the governance context in which they are applied… not subjugated by that context" (Trakman, p. 275, 2008). Periodic critical reflection on the changing needs of the group should impact the specific governance model employed.
- It appears that focused ongoing curriculum including group dynamics and decision-making could remediate issues experienced with shared governance; however, remediation appears to be short lived with only the addition of early term curriculum.
- The following *Cohort Governance Curriculum Model* is one method that could provide learning synergies between consistent curriculum throughout the cohort duration and the shared governance experience among cohort members. It includes at least three sites (Introduction, 1/3 through duration and 2/3 through duration) for content introduction, critical reflection and content reintroduction:

Cohort Governance Curriculum Model

- Shared Learning Training:
  - Individual Differences
  - Group Roles/Decision-making
- Shared Output
  - Covenant of Purpose
  - Decision-making policy
  - Conflict Management Plan
  - Critical reflection of Cohort needs

Cohort Introduction through 1st third of program

1st third of Cohort program through 2nd third of program

- Shared Learning Training:
  - Conflict Management
  - Consensus Building
- Shared Output
  - Critical reflection upon cohort needs & democratic process
  - Develop model of success

- Shared Learning Training:
  - Democratic Process
  - Course correction measures
- Shared Output
  - Critical reflection upon cohort needs
  - Shared model of democratic process.

Cohort Conclusion

Further Research Recommended

Further research questions for a more in-depth study following implementation of this *Cohort Governance Curriculum Model* model:

1) How was self-governance created in the context of the adult education cohort?
2) In practicing self-governance, how did the tools provided help the individuals and the cohort work more effectively in the adult education curriculum?
3) How did the model of self-governance hinder or foster a democratic process?
4) What was learned regarding the relationship of self-governance, the cohort model and adult education?

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The most important implication of this exploratory study is that in order to effectively impact social justice by evoking first-hand experience of the democratic process, the following must be developed through a shared learning experience, in this case by those participating in shared cohort governance. (Trakman, 2008):

- Effective use of Intercultural communication tools (i.e. understanding and communicating across difference) (Sun, 2011)
- Practice in and understanding of group dynamic skills (conflict management, team formation and shared decision-making)

These findings suggest that agency and empowerment in larger arenas of democratic practice and social justice may be facilitated with active education in human dynamics for the individual and the organizations within which they participate. John Dewey (1920) reminds us, "Communication, sharing, joint participation are the only actual ways of universalizing the moral law and end" (p. 197).

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