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Cohort Based Learning: Application to Learning Organizations and Student Academic Success

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Abstract

Learning is a natural process shared by its members in most social and educational institutions, and is seen as both the primary vehicle and foundation for the building and achievement of one's career and /or personal goals. This research offers critical insight into the dimensions of cohort based learning communities and the implications it presents for adult learners and learning organizations in Canada. Supported by constructivist and socio-cultural adult learning theories, cohort based learning is a valued learning option encapsulating a pedagogical approach for its adult participants. Research infers this learning venue has both merits and limitations in higher education, and concludes with the recommendation for further research concerning the advantages and disadvantages posed by such a curricular approach.

Context

Over the past thirty-five years, Canadian Colleges have strived to redefine teaching and learning, most recently around lifelong learning within the traditional foundations of education. Transformational forces, including increased competition, changing needs and expectations of society, and the drive for performance and accountability, add even further pressure to the redefinition process. Research proves that students demand flexibility with - and a variety of -learning opportunities, responsiveness to their individual learning needs, and knowledge currency that is transferable to a variety of employment opportunities. These dynamics created the Learning Revolution, as we know it, a concept that in and of itself has gained tremendous momentum in the past ten to fifteen years as educational settings move towards being learning-centred institutions. This movement includes making a complete paradigm shift in knowledge, skills, and attitudes of all participating members, placing responsibility on the learners for participation in the learning process within educational settings, as well as placing learning foremost in all aspects of an institution. Students no longer seek the "sage on the stage" approach to teaching and learning, thus opening the door to faculty exploring a number of multifaceted and facilitative roles in teaching. Literature infers that by creating and building learning communities - specifically a cohort-based framework for learning - it is anticipated that success in placing learning first will be achieved. When appropriately supported by the dynamics of a cohort model, as

well as by the social-cultural and constructivist learning theories inherent within an adult learning environment, student academic success and retention will significantly increase. The positive benefits of this model to the adult learner as well as to learning organizations are significant, and must be explored to appreciate their full influence.

Becoming A Learning Organization

Colleges in Canada are now at critical points in their efforts to make a complete paradigm shift, placing students first in all aspects of their institutions as well as creating new maps and new ways of thinking about learning. Leading institutions are now revisiting their mission, purpose, core values, strategic directions and all policies and programs to ensure quality assurance, and also to align their institutions to learning centred principles. According to Terry O'Banion (1999), these six learning principles for becoming a learning organization include:

- i. "Creating substantive change in individual learners.
- ii. Engaging learners in the learning process as full partners assuming primary responsibility for their own choices.
- iii. Creating and offering as many options for learning as possible to create successful experiences.
- iv. Assisting learners to form and participate in collaborative learning activities.
- v. Defining the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners.
- vi. The learning college and its learning facilitators succeed only when improved and expanded learning can be documented for its learners".

Terry O'Banion, in many of his articles on learning organizations, further identifies the importance of all members in an educational setting posing these questions when considering change in any aspect of the institution:

1. "Does this action improve and expand learning?
2. How do we know this action improves and expands learning?" (1999).

Harlacher and Gollattscheck (1996) feel strongly that learning organizations must not only rely on previous achievements they have made, but also be visionary and perceptual in building learning communities, specifically that of cohort groupings, to meet the needs of the community. It is critical to the success of learning organizations and the academic success of all its learners.

Learning Communities within Learning Organizations

Within the structure of learning organizations are clusters of learning communities of formal and informal capacities working towards fulfilling the six learning organization principles. For the

purpose of this review, formal adult learning communities will be addressed, including those groups of individuals who come together to create shared purpose, to develop shared goals and knowledge, and to work together to create solutions to complex problems (Wilson and Ryder, 2003; Hugo, 2002; Stein and Imel, 2002; Knight, 2003; Wenger, 1998; and O'Banion, 1999; Tinto, 1998). Learning in community is an expression of the desire to engage with, learn with, and create local knowledge voluntarily through teaching and learning roles (Stein, 2002; Senge, 1990). Learning communities facilitate the acquisition of a caring and emotional learning climate over time; foundations in learning are created, and synergy as well as confidence increase significantly as individuals learn to depend upon one another for social support (Roueche et al., 1997; Commission on the future of Colleges, 1988). Community building is the key to student success at higher educational levels, linking all action to learning. Appreciation for the communal climate is enhanced when individuals are aware of how their invested personal knowledge is enhanced by the contributions of others (Tinto, 1998).

Learning Communities – Embracing Cohort Based Learning Models

Within the context of learning communities are cohort-based learning groups. "A cohort can be defined as a group of people who stay together from beginning to end of a program and who grow through the process while developing community and support, experiencing essentially the same stimulus material and challenges of the work environment (Goodland, 1990; Hanley and Mather, 1999; Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Research infers that students who have the opportunity to develop and build their personal, social, and academic skills within a pedagogical community may be more advanced in their ability to foster new communities within their professional careers (Shapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott, 2001). According to Potthoff, Frederickson, Batenhorst, and Tracy (Summer, 2001), there are essentially three types of cohorts – including closed (students take coursework together – no opportunity for new students to join), open (students may complete courses outside of the cohort), and fluid (students may drop or join at any time). Traditional students are exposed to four or five courses during a four-month period, while adult cohort members are exposed to one course at a time for a very short time frame. Despite an initial adjustment as adults re-enter the academic environment, the structure promotes the ability of its participants to learn how to balance their family and career responsibilities. Are accelerated courses effective in facilitating content mastery as well as meeting the expressed goals of students? In their research, Wlodkowski and Westover (1999), Gimes and Niss (1989), and Scott and Conrad (1992) discover that cohort based learning is indeed a valuable and effective process.

This learning structure further fits a niche for non-traditional learners who cannot take part in traditional learning venues. When cohort learning is approached holistically, individuals are highly

motivated to learn (Connor and Killner, 2001; Cohort Model Helps Online Retention, 2003). They feel included and respected within the learning group, they have a positive attitude toward the subject matter, they demonstrate the ability to make learning meaningful to themselves and others, and they are able to demonstrate competence in a variety of ways (Mello, 2003; Senge, 1994; and Wlodkowski, 1999). A study done by Lather and Richardson indicates that the adult students in their study felt they learned more within the cohort structure as it helped them frame an understanding of the content (1997). These students also felt that their environment was familiar and supportive of change. It facilitated the creation of individual and group identity and cohesion, and it promoted the development of professional behaviours through ongoing inquiry and critical reflection (Lather and Richardson, 1997; Wenger, 1998; Merriam, 2003; Potthoff, Batenhorst, Tracy, and Frederickson, Summer 2001; Johnson and Johnson, 1987; Ridgeway, 1983). Equally as powerful is the confidence gained through emotional and educational supports, resulting in increased professional behaviour (Kelly and Dietrich, 1995; Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Mentoring is a common practice of cohort based learning, and ongoing assessment of all aspects of the model is critical to the success of the learners and environment (Potthoff et al, 2001; Kincaid and Horner, 1998; and Morey, 1997). Other components influencing learning as indicated by various studies include:

- a. Student capability – Students feel more confident and socially supported to take risks and explore new ways of thinking. Students are also participants in determining the role of the teacher. Adult students, when compared to younger college students, are more willing to make sacrifices to achieve academically (Stratil, 1988; Wlodkowski, 1999; Berch, 2002; Morey, 1997).
- b. Quality of Instruction – Is there a facilitator? Is the curriculum experiential, and focusing on real life situations / content for the learners? (Morey, 1997; Potthoff et al., 2001). Essentially, students and facilitators are partners in transformational learning, together building a climate conducive to supporting each other's success. A successful element of cohort based learning in a Master of Arts Degree with Central Michigan University and Humber Institute of Advanced Learning and Technology is the commitment and full participation of international and national professionals and faculty. Combined collaboration from both institutions promotes success in many aspects of the program (Roueche, 1995).
- c. Personal motivation – Motivation typically demonstrates a high correlation to learning (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996; Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999). Peer support, trust, shared understanding and vision, self directed learning, and social connections appear to have huge impacts on student satisfaction.
- d. Emotional well being. Dialogue and interaction highlights: If my

peers are able to do it, then so can I (Witte, 1998).

The applicability of this model to the learning organization principles identified by O'Banion is significant such that it promotes collaboration and the sharing of knowledge between all members, students are able to direct their learning through the facilitative abilities of the instructor, and it is a viable option meeting many multi-level needs of its participants. Such a model, however, accompanies costs as well as benefits to a learning environment. Traditional scholars do criticize this method, questioning the consistent value of content and the ability of students to learn material in a condensed format. The influences of individual personalities upon classroom dynamics are significant (Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Instructors must not assume that cooperation and trust supposed to be inherent in a group does not indicate that the cohort will be successful (Burnaford and Hobson, 1995; Sapon-Shevin and Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Students may become competitive and / or cliquy, groups may pursue too much control perhaps not attaining the objectives and learning outcomes of the course, and instructors may find themselves dealing with a number of classroom politics. Studies indicate that faculty are having to assume a number of roles in order to support students in their academic success, as well as having to put in additional time to respond to questions / concerns outside the classroom hours. These variables place added responsibilities onto the learning organization's structure to find the faculty able to deal with these components, including the provision of training appropriate to support instructors in cohort environments, as well as enhancing student services to meet the needs of these learners.

Learning Theories Supporting Cohort Based Learning

Congruent with learning communities or communities of practice, self-direction, and transformative learning is a concept known as constructivism (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Susan Imel (1995) identifies constructivism as: individuals who actively construct meaning by interacting with their environment and who incorporate new information into their existing knowledge (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Social constructivism accounts for where the learning actually occurs, which in this case is in a cohort framework (Stage, Muller, Kinzia, and Simmons, 1998). The communal climate emphasizes the social and group components, and further enhances the performance and productivity of each student invested in the group (Gideon, Kundra, Barley, and Stephen, 1988; Barab and Duffy, 2000; Heaney, 1999; Wenger, 1998; and Zukas and Malcolm; 2000). Each student brings a cultural identity to the group, and how they participate and assume roles within the group is a direct function of this (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertch, 1991). Patricia Cross, a guru on adult learning, states that it is important to look at how individuals socially interpret their environment because of who they are. Typically, this occurs through negotiation and agreement among knowledgeable, confident peers. Learning is socially based, whereby students need to feel socially,

neurologically, and experientially connected to their learning (1998). Social interaction is fundamental to the cohort structure, as it is a supporting factor in creating new social knowledge, and is the key to preventing isolation on the learning journey (John Dewey, 1967). Social supports appear to be the glue that connects the students together.

Cohort Based Learning and Retention

A study conducted by Potthoff, Frederickson, Batenhorst, and Tracy on 28 elementary and secondary school teachers identified how successful cohort based learning was in improving retention. Qualitative research in this study proved that working in cohorts does improve an individual's ability to acquire new knowledge and perspectives, as well as improve their academic standing and personal expectations surrounding learning (Hill, 1992; Wehlange, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez, 1988; Potthoff, Frederickson, Batenhorst, and Tracy, 2001). Another study conducted by Basom et al. (1993) inferred that new forms of collaboration and teaching methodologies were assumed by faculty teaching in a cohort model. "Each of these studies had more than 90% of the participants complete their graduate studies" (41). Program coherence, motivation of adult learners, and the connecting of coursework towards a degree completion were also additional supporters of student retention. Bridging the gap between academia and social behaviours is the key to locking in student persistence with their studies (Tinto, 1998).

Summary of Educational Research – The Bottom Line

A number of recent studies in the field were found to address cohort based learning within learning communities or organizations. Many of these studies indicated the value added when utilizing this type of curricular approach within an educational setting, proving the need for learning organizations to utilize this type of approach within their setting to address community needs. Many of these studies originated in the elementary and postsecondary field, with some exceptions of informal learning environments. All studies were capable of summarizing the numerous strengths of cohort learning environments, and most studies utilized a Likert type qualitative methodology of assessing the issues related to the effects of cohorts on learners. Gaps in research appear to be evident, leaving many opportunities and inquiries for researchers to pursue, including:

- a. Determining what the best indicators are of learning? Is it grades, pre and post tests?
- b. Is time a necessary condition for learning or is it only a modest predictor of achievement?
- c. Is academic learning time more strongly related to achievement? (Fisher, 1980; Wlodkowski and Westover, 1999).
- d. Is there a relationship between time in class and length of course on student learning and attitudes?
- e. How do students perceive the dimensions of a cohort design to

influence their academic success?

There is limited research affirming or disproving the specific advantages and disadvantages of cohorts in various educational settings. Limited studies do focus on the advantages of cohorts, but fail to recognize the faults of the model as well. Hanley and Mather (1999) question, "Is it possible to evaluate the advantages of a cohort grouping independent of program design?" An interesting study concerning cohorts and student academic success would entail comparing cohorts in the traditional community college classroom taking the same courses as a cohort completing the same courses outside of the nine to five workday. What aspects of the cohort design would support student success in that situation? What are the ongoing implications for the learning organization? These questions are only a few of the possible questions to pose concerning the influences of cohort based learning on learners. Many aspects of the cohort design have yet to be unravelled to fully appreciate its value to education.

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