

The Need for Connection: Instructional Staff Experiences with Cohort Groups

**Clive Hickson
University of Alberta**

The concept of community is viewed as essential in supporting collaboration and promoting learning (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). However, research has focused on student perspectives of learning communities, with little understanding of the perspectives of instructional staff members (Hickson, 2015). This paper addresses the perspectives of a group of instructors who work with a student cohort learning community and identifies the need for instructional staff to: develop the potential of the cohort; recognize the instructional staff as a cohort; and provide platforms for communication between instructional staff to share information on cohort matters.

INTRODUCTION

The 1980s witnessed the emergence of a business model approach in higher education at universities and colleges (Kerby, Branham, & Mallinger, 2014). This resulted in institutional administrators being faced with the need to be financially creative in managing large scale work environments that incur considerable costs at the same time as also ensuring that high quality educational experiences are provided to the students enrolled in its programming (Hickson, 2015). Due to the public demand for accountability and reform, Dyson and Hanley (2002) identified that administrators at higher education institutions began to look at the effectiveness of instructional delivery with considerable interest. This resulted in a movement toward more learner-centered experiences (Doolen & Biddlecombe, 2014; Leisey, Mulcare, Comeford, & Kudrimoti, 2014) and, in recent years, an appreciation of the importance of developing *learning communities* in higher education environments (Cleveland-Innes, Garrison, & Kinsel, 2008; Leisey et al., 2014) as community has been identified as being essential when aiming to support collaboration and promote high levels of learning (Rausch & Crawford, 2012).

With the continued increase of popularity of undergraduate education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), the need for viable programs to assist in the delivery of undergraduate coursework and the support of the continued development of instructional excellence seems to be essential in order to ensure that effective learning opportunities for students are provided (Hickson, 2015). Therefore, how programming experiences are structured is a critically important consideration for institutions to address in order to best support student learning opportunities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Much of what is known of learning communities and cohort learning has been from research that has focused the perspective of students experiencing learning activities within a cohort group. This research

has identified such benefits as increased learning, and feelings of belonging and cohesion, student retention and completion trends, and the organizational benefits.

Cohorts as Learning Communities

When students are placed in consistent groupings for their learning, such experiences are referred to as cohort learning (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter, 2011). These communities of learning are characterized, according to Pemberton and Akkary (2010), as intentional groupings of students during a program of study for shared experiences, interactions, collective effort, and learning toward educational goals. Similarly, Rausch and Crawford (2012) also describe cohort experiences as a group of students who proceed through a common program of learning in a sequential manner.

Cohort models have been developed from the social cognition research base that indicates that learning is best achieved when students are actively involved in interaction with others and the sharing of experiences (Lei et al., 2011). Unzueta, Moores-Abdool and Donet (2008) suggested that theories in particular associated with group learning and cohesion provided the framework for the development of cohort education. As such, cohort experiences range from a flexible open-cohort through to a restrictive closed-cohort format (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010). The flexible open-cohort allows some freedom for students to move in and out of common learning experiences according to programmatic needs and student preference, while the restrictive format is characterized by a single group that shares all learning experiences together in the same sequence and at the same time.

Experiences with Cohort Learning Communities

Since the early 1990s, the practice of providing cohort-based learning has increased in colleges and universities (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). The adoption of the cohort approach to programming has been identified to provide a number of positive impacts both at the institutional and student levels.

Increased Learning

Cohort learning experiences can promote intellectual and academic stimulation (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). Unzueta et al. (2008) further reported that students believed that belonging to a cohort learning community positively impacted their learning due to all the students were working toward a similar goal and supported and motivated each other in that process.

Belonging

The cohort learning environment purposefully aims to access interpersonal relationships to enhance the learning process and create opportunities for support from fellow cohort members (Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). Student feelings of belonging, unity, and support were also reported by Unzueta et al. (2008) and by Lei et al. (2011) who suggested that the literature indicates that students in a cohort learning experience appreciate the trust that is established between cohort members and the strong familial type of ties that develop between members.

Student Retention and Completion

The issue of retention of students in programming is something that all institutional administrators face. The impact of high rates of attrition of students can be viewed in two ways. One view point is that attrition can indicate that there are high standards of performance required and successful students are considered or recognized as being well above average. However, a second, and very different, view point can potentially result in serious implications for institutions. When students do not succeed and rates of attrition are high, it is often accompanied by critique of instructional and student development priorities and can centre on the question of the financial expense to students. While institutions need to be cognizant of academic rigour and standards of achievement, the notion of admitting students in to programming knowing that a large portion will likely never finish does raise ethical questions for the institution and issues of value for the student. Therefore, the positive effect of cohort membership on student enrolment retention rate (Lei et al., 2011) is an important factor for institutional administrators to consider.

Organizational Ease

The administrative ease of design and delivery of a cohort program was identified by Nimer (2009) due to the use of a *lock-step* style of program scheduling. As administrators know the program from *start to finish* and the fact that all students require the same coursework, allows for administrators to know such things as registration numbers, class sizes, room needs, and even text book ordering requirements. From a student perspective, Unzueta et al. (2008) also suggested that there were also organizational advantages at the student level too, stating that students find cohort programming to be easier to: navigate; know and follow necessary procedures; and understand pre-determined programming.

Benefits and Drawbacks

Pemberton and Akkary (2010) in a review of cohort experiences and Lei et al. (2011) stated that there are numerous studies reporting positive findings but that there is also evidence of drawbacks of cohort community experiences. These drawbacks mainly centre on issues of tension, jealousy, and competition between members. However, despite the drawbacks, the literature demonstrating the benefits of cohort experiences in regards to organizational efficiency and student learning benefits (Lei et al., 2011) presents a compelling argument for the adoption of cohort programming in educational programming (Pemberton & Akkary, 2010) and membership of a cohort learning community outweighed any potential concerns (Lei et al., 2011; Pemberton & Akkary, 2010).

Recognizing Instructional Staff in Learning Communities

Although there are many positive results from students being part of a learning community through their cohort experiences, there may well be issues for instructional staff with the increase of student presence and voice. Therefore, understanding of the role of instructional staff in a cohort experience is of value to the full understanding of the cohort community experience.

In discussing the notion of *Community of Inquiry*, researchers have identified three interdependent elements that are necessary to ensure a meaningful learning experience: social, teaching, and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2010). In particular, the teaching presence element describes instructional staff as being critical for success and the modeling and facilitative role that instructors play as being vital for student retention and progress.

However, although instructional staff members are viewed as being a part of the overall success of such learning communities, little else is known about the specific role that instructors play in this success or their perceptions of their role. Unzueta et al. (2008) found that professors working with a cohort learning community identified student relationships, unity, and group dynamics as benefits. However, the research findings from Unzueta et al. focussed upon the opinions of professors regarding what they observed of the student experience of being in a cohort community rather than their perspectives of their experiences as an instructor.

Therefore, due to the distinct absence of an understanding of the role of instructional staff in a cohort experience, research is required to add to the literature and provide new understanding on the cohort community from an instructional staff perspective. Such new understanding not only has the potential to add to the literature, but also has the potential to provide benefit on a practical level too. Institutions have a responsibility to regularly evaluate programming to determine and understand its effectiveness and consider any potential need for change. As teacher education programming must be reflective of ever-changing societal needs, continual and evaluative action is a necessity.

The understanding of the experiences and perspectives of not only students but also instructional staff in cohort learning communities can be of significant importance and value both theoretically and practically, and has the potential to contribute to program understanding and effective implementation of learning community experiences.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This two-year research study focused on a cohort learning environment established in a collaborative programming experience between a large research intensive university and a small regional college in northern Canada. Established in the late 1990s, this joint venture was constructed in a manner that allowed the program participants to take all the required undergraduate course work at a local regional college while attaining a Bachelor of Education degree from the larger university. The program was designed to achieve two major benefits: first it allowed students to continue to live in their home community and undertake their undergraduate degree coursework without the need to move to a larger centre and, second, it assists in creating qualified, potential employees with community ties for regional employers.

Due to the uniqueness of the program at the regional college, the students experience their programming as part of a cohort that Pemberton and Akkary (2010) would describe as a *restrictive closed-cohort*. As such, cohort members take the same courses as each other and in the same sequence; thereby following a common community style class schedule that is consistent amongst all of the students. Interestingly, this issue of community is further extended as a single classroom is used for the delivery location of the vast majority of the courses in the program.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research study was to investigate and understand the perspectives of instructional staff members that teach students in a cohort learning community setting. As there is little research understanding of such perspectives, it is hoped that this research study will specifically add to the understanding of what the instructor experience is, whether instructors believe that they can contribute to the overall cohort experience of students, and if instructors ever become part of the cohort experience.

RESEARCH PLANS AND METHODS

The discussion presented in this paper represents understandings from two years of study. Based on the identified lack of understanding of the cohort experience from the instructional perspective, the research study began with investigating and considering the following three research questions:

1. *What are the experiences of instructors when delivering coursework to a cohort of students?*
2. *How can instructors positively contribute to the student experience?*
3. *In what ways can instructors become part of the overall cohort experience?*

Research Design

The research study utilized action research as its methodology. Action research in education involves systematic inquiry to gather information about, and subsequently, improve the ways of operation, teaching, and how well students learn (Creswell, 2014). The study followed an *outsider in collaboration with insider* approach to the action research process (Herr & Anderson, 2005). This approach to action research requires that both the researcher and the participants to collaborate in order to understand issues and find answers to question(s) or problem(s).

As per the Action Research design, the research study had a series of repeated phases (initial, action, observation, reflection) with each phase consisting of a particular focus such as relationship building, the consideration and reflection on instructional practice, and planning future action. According to Mills (2011) action research data collection techniques can be categorized under three headings: experiencing (e.g. observations and field notes), enquiring (e.g. interviews and discussions), and examining (e.g. journals and personal reflections). Therefore, the research study utilized data collection techniques that fell under each of these categories.

The role of the researcher in this study has been both a participant observer and non-participant observer (Creswell, 2014). The participant observer role occurred during the planning, action, and reflection phases of the study. However, during the observation phases the researcher took on a non-participant observer role while taking field notes and recording observations. Consequently, the researcher met with participants, discussed their experiences, conducted individual informal interviews and small group discussion sessions, collected on-line individual reflections and compiled researcher notes throughout the research process. Throughout this process, probing style questions were posed by the researcher to clarify and seek elaboration of participants' responses as suggested by Patton (2014). The specific probes were designed to help clarify the understanding and interpretation of the data being provided and develop a deep understanding of instructor perspectives of their experiences of teaching a cohort learning community.

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, several sources of validity were considered. Process validity to examine the adequacy of the processes used in the different phases of the study was continually established through the triangulation of journals, observations and interviews. Democratic validity, ensuring that all perspectives were taken into account, occurred through data gathering from individual interviews, and dialogic validity was enhanced through the continued intentional sharing of findings with the participants.

Participants

All eight of the instructional staff members delivering the variety of courses to the cohort learning community were invited to participate in the study. From this total of eight, seven agreed to do so, providing a participant pool representing 87.5% of the overall instructional staff.

The instructional staff participants were all experienced educators. Their experience ranged from having spent several years of teaching in the K-12 school system through to having multiple years of experience at a college or university level teaching course work. All seven of the instructional staff participants had obtained at least a master's degree and several had earned a doctorate. Of note is that the instructional staff participants had a range of previous experiences of teaching with cohort groups at the post-secondary level. In particular, one participant had taught in excess of 10 cohort groups, several had taught more than five cohort groups, one participant had taught a cohort group but at another educational institution, and another was completely new to the cohort experience and teaching to such a learning community of students. However, none of the participant instructors reported that they had personally experienced being part of a cohort learning community as learners themselves.

Ethical Considerations and Safeguards

The research study was conducted according to the relevant Research Ethics Board requirements. Informed consent was obtained from all of the participants after being informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Collection

Data was collected from a variety of sources. From this data it was possible to interpret and begin to understand the lived experience of the instructional staff members; their reactions to teaching in a program that involved cohort learning, and whether they considered their participation to be beneficial. The qualitative data collected were interpretationally analyzed. Analysis involved manual categorization through line-by-line coding of transcripts, interpretation of researcher interview notes, and participant reflections that identified salient meaning from the data. Such meaning was then grouped by content into themes (e.g., the importance of potential, recognizing the instructional cohort, etc.) As such, themes and patterns were identified to describe, draw conclusions, and explain the phenomenon being studied (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the data collected from the instructional staff participants indicated that they believed that their experiences were most beneficial. Interestingly, they noted that these benefits were not only restricted to the student cohort community members but also applied to the instructors themselves.

In regards to the kind of benefits that the instructional staff members believed that the student cohort members experienced, they remarked that although there are always "...pockets of students..." that can challenge any teaching environment, they found that the cohort experience allowed students to "...do it together to extend learning..." and there was a "...power to the group..." that supported and aided student work habits. Comments were made that suggested that "...common goals..." resulted in opportunities for "...interactions for students with each other..." and that there was a "...shared motivation..." to achieve learning expectations or goals. These findings of increased learning opportunities and a supportive environment mirror the understanding gained by other researchers (e.g. Lei et al., 2011; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006; Unzueta et al., 2008).

Overall, the instructional staff participants overwhelmingly supported the value of a cohort community experience and concluded that they believed that their own participation had also been most beneficial. As one participant remarked, "A really, really worthwhile experience. I have become a better teacher. I find that I need to not only consider what I need to teach but also consider how might I support other instructors and how can they support me..."

The data collected in this study has been rich and varied with many points of discussion. From this, three themes of experience for the participants were identified. The three themes identified were:

1. *The importance of developing the potential of the cohort.*
2. *Recognizing the instructional team as a cohort.*
3. *Providing platforms for communication between instructional staff to share information on cohort matters.*

Theme: The Importance of Developing the Potential of the Cohort

In alignment with the strengths identified by others (e.g. Lei et al., 2011; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006), participant comments collected in personal interviews and group sessions identified that the cohort experience provided a level of collaboration and comfort for the students that supported learning experiences. Hence, it was believed that students were prepared to risk and sought support from each other. Example participant comments:

"Cohorts can provide opportunities due to trust, allegiance, and loyalties."

"Cohorts can present a different dynamic. There is a comfort to risk but also a concern to critique... collaboration is something that can be exploited with a cohort group."

It was also remarked that it was critically important that the cohort members be given opportunities to learn how to function effectively as a group. In order to not limit the potential of the cohort, it was viewed as a weakness by the instructional staff to simply assume that students had this understanding. This was seen in such participant comments as:

"We cannot assume that students will become a cohort, we need to teach being a cohort...students need to learn to be in a cohort."

"...need to set the tone for the group...you belong to a cohort so you have responsibilities to yourself, the cohort, program, and profession...you are part of a club!"

"...students are getting something special...we need to let them know...need to be deliberate in letting students know what being in a cohort is..."

These comments illustrate that the instructional staff participants believe that cohorts have considerable potential but such potential needs to be drawn out of the group rather than simply expecting for it to occur. That, according to the participants, is a key role that instructors can play; to support the realization and impact of the cohort.

Theme: The Importance of Recognizing the Instructional Team as a Cohort

Interestingly, the instructional staff participants identified that they too needed to become a cohort; a need to provide opportunities for reflection as an instructor cohort. The opportunity to share instructional expertise and develop relationships was seen as important. Example participant comments:

“We need to think of ourselves as a cohort too. Not really part of the student cohort but something like a partner or a co-cohort, one that can intersect when necessary but has its own identity. How can we not think that way?”

“I think we are a cohort in many ways, our own cohort...we haven’t really formally acted like one in the past...in a coherent manner as such...but we have informally been one especially between certain instructors. Maybe we need to think of ourselves as a cohort of instructors much more than we normally do. I think that would have a lot of benefits for everyone.”

“We are (a cohort) whether we want to be or not as we have a common group of students.”

While there was a belief from participants that an instructional cohort may have occurred previously in an informal manner, it was suggested that there was a need to do so in a more formal manner. Such a move was viewed to have the potential of allowing instructional staff to share ideas, thoughts, and best practices and to ensure that the learning environment is informed from all those that contribute to the student cohort experience. This notion is highlighted in this participant comment:

“Perhaps it is just me but I have always wanted to be more than just an individual instructor...especially as we have a group of students that have common experiences. Surely, we need to talk to each other to ensure that we know what is going on in each other’s classes. Isn’t that good pedagogy?”

Participant remarks indicated that they believe that if the instructional staff members see themselves as a cohort, students would be positively impacted. This thought supports the work of Ford and Vaughn (2011) who suggested that a bond or connection between instructors and students is necessary for a successful cohort experience. Therefore, the purposeful creation of an instructional staff cohort that could operate separately from and also intersect with the student cohort could prove to be advantageous to the overall learning environment.

Theme: Providing Platforms for Communication between Instructional Staff to share Information on Cohort Matters

Participants identified the importance for instructional staff to have the opportunity to meet as a group to discuss issues pertaining to cohort matters and their instructional practices. The instructional staff participants remarked that they believed that even though the students are adults, often times, they can require assistance to deal with learning issues or those things that occur in day-to-life outside of the learning environment. In 2011, Lei et al. suggested that the introduction of cohort learning experiences in further education was due to issues that included instructor isolation which can lead to a lack of effectiveness. The fostering of opportunities for communication between instructional staff could address such possible isolation and increase instructional effectiveness. As one participant remarked:

“Discussing issues with someone else is helpful...I think others are probably experiencing the same kind of issues as we share the same group of students.”

The data collected from the instructional staff participants indicated a belief that increasing communication could support them as a group, provide for a better student experience, and also illustrate to students that the instructional staff are a collective team. Example participant comments:

“Our teaching is not done in isolation...one body of students that we all share...as our paths do not always cross...be aware of issues...”

“Just knowing that there were others probably having to deal with the same issues or concerns with the same students is comforting.”

“When other instructors discuss what they were seeing or experiencing, I understand that I could learn from their experiences too.”

“...need to create connections for students...the instructional team needs to role model...we need to ensure that the instructional team speaks the same language.”

“Most of the instructors share the same office, the same student group; can we not arrange times for us to share other issues too?”

Similar to Pemberton and Akkary (2010) who suggested that cohorts provide opportunities for students to share experiences, the instructional staff participants also recognized the importance of sharing information amongst their own membership. As explained by one instructional staff participant:

“...students know more than we do, they all experience the same things each day...they know what is going on, where I come in one day a week and know little of what has occurred since my last visit...”

Therefore, communication between the instructional staff could increase information and understanding in the instructional staff group and decrease the isolation identified by Lei et al. (2011). Such sharing could, according to the participants, provide a collective response to those students in need of support. This would negate the need for a student to inform a number of separate instructors the same set of information and create the possibility for having a collective, consistent response across all the members of the instructional team.

CONCLUSION

From the data collected from this research study, it is clearly evident that the instructional staff participants recognize and appreciate the uniqueness of the cohort experience and the benefits that it can bring for both students and themselves. They also have articulated that in many ways they see themselves as a possible cohort that can, at times, intersect with the student cohort group. It was mentioned on numerous occasions by the instructional staff participants that, by assuming a cohort identity, they could become more: aware of specific issues with the student cohort group; cognizant of integrating teaching ideas from each other; and supportive of each other.

Research questions

In regard to the research questions, analysis of the data has provided evidence that can answer or at least partially attend to each of the three questions.

1. *What are the experiences of instructors when delivering coursework to a cohort of students?*

Overall, the participants believe that the experience is positive. While, teaching to any group is not an easy task, it is clearly seen to be an enjoyable experience. As one participant suggested:

“Not having taught a cohort before I really didn’t know what to expect. I suppose some things were a surprise and others were what I expected. However, it has been really enjoyable. It is like being part of a family in many ways – there are ups and downs but generally it is much more personal than some of my other experiences.”

2. *How can instructors positively contribute to the student experience?*

The instructional staff participants indicated that not only do they believe that a cohort of instructional staff could have a personal benefit for themselves but suggest that it could have many positive experiences for students, and the cohort in general, too. For example, a participant remarked:

“We need to be able to come together on a regular basis. That way, we can support each other and also be a better team for the students. I will not be asking them to think one way and someone else the opposite.”

3. *In what ways can instructors become part of the overall cohort experience?*

The instructional staff participants identified a need to create their own instructional cohort group or, at the very least, have opportunities to come together to discuss instructional and cohort issues. However, at this stage of the research study, this has not been enacted and is still an aim for further research. It is speculated that this group could operate separately from the student cohort or, at times, intersect with the student cohort. Further study will, hopefully, explore this notion and investigate if it is possible to achieve.

Concluding Thoughts and Planned Actions

This paper addresses a study that has occurred over a two-year time period. It is hoped to further examine the mentioned themes, any others that may be identified, and investigate how an instructional staff cohort might be created, as it is clear that the instructional staff participants in this study visualize a distinct role for instructors in the overall cohort experience by intentionally creating an instructional staff cohort. How such a cohort of instructors might operate and exactly what role and responsibilities it might require to be successful, are likely to be a major focus of potential future work. Time will need to be taken to examine if a cohort of instructors is possible to achieve, and to determine whether instructional staff believe that it is beneficial to their teaching, the overall learning environment for the cohort learning community, and the program in general. Such an understanding will, hopefully, add to the connection between instructional staff and the cohort community membership and the overall understanding of cohort learning communities.

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