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THE CLOSED COHORT LEARNING MODEL: ENABLING INNOVATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

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THE CLOSED COHORT LEARNING MODEL: ENABLING INNOVATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

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THE CLOSED COHORT LEARNING MODEL: ENABLING INNOVATION AND
ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

By

Frederick Dwight Ellrich

A Dissertation

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"The cohort structure promotes the development of community, contributes to enhanced academic rigor, and personalizes an otherwise anonymous set of experiences for students".

Joseph Murphy, *Preparing Tomorrow's School Leaders: Alternative Designs, 1993*

Abstract

This study examines the development of trust, communication, and collaboration in a closed cohort academic community. The closed cohort has gained in popularity in recent years and is now common at the graduate level, especially in the colleges of business and education. A closed cohort is a group of students who begin and end together, and proceed in lock step through a sequence of courses.

The research is a case study of a master's program in leadership at a university in the mid-south area of the United States. The research approach is phenomenological in that the researcher was an instructor in the program and has taught every cohort. The qualitative method used was the focus group interview. Four such interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed. The data was analyzed using inductive interpretive analysis.

The analysis revealed that trust did strengthen over time and provided a basis for more open discussion and the sharing of life experiences. This cycle of improving trust and communication yielded a collaborative learning environment that was characterized by a personal accountability for the learning and development of others in the cohort. As students learned to listen to and appreciate the perspectives of others, an extended period of self-reflection yielded a personal transformation that the student attributed specifically to their closed cohort community.

Several unintended consequences regarding the presence and outcomes of dysfunctional behavior are noted. They are addressed as implications for practice and further research. Attention to group dynamics and teacher efficacy offer the most fertile areas for both. The analysis suggests that conclusions from this study should have wide appli-

cation to similar programs and can provide a basis for research that would continue to

improve the closed cohort learning model as an effective approach for adult learners.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Innovation and change are major themes for successful organizations in the global economy. In order for employees to innovate as effectively as possible, they must collaborate and learn in an environment characterized by a level of open communication as facilitated by trust. Institutions of higher education are preparing students to participate as collaborators and innovators by implementing a cohort-based learning model in graduate degree programs, most noticeably in education and business. Using focus group interviews this study explores a particular closed-cohort graduate program: a group whose membership stays intact as they proceed in unison through a sequence of courses. Of interest for this study is the development of trust, communication, and collaboration over the duration of the program.

Innovation and Change

The pace and scope of change primarily fueled by globalization, shifting political power and other macro-economic factors requires new ways of competing and working, hence more effective and efficient ways of learning (Johnston & Hawke, 2002). Organizations must learn to compete and succeed by adopting systems and methods that support large-scale change (Wheatley, 1997). To this end, it is important that organizations have a culture that supports innovation whether it is to deliver breakthrough products and services or the incremental process improvements that improve efficiencies and strategy execution (Huber Institute, 2002). This growing complexity of change will severely test the capabilities of an organization's managers and employees because the behavior that supports innovation can affect patterns of work or cultural values (Dodgson, 1993). It is understood that greater employee involvement has been linked to higher job satisfaction re-

sulting in higher motivation and greater skill development, all antecedents of change and innovation (Schraeder, 2004). However, this supposes that leadership and the organizational culture positively affect employees' readiness for change (Hanpachern, Morgan, & Griego, 1998). Leaders of effective organizations have had to embrace an adaptive approach to leading characterized by enabling their constituents to develop solutions to the problems and issues facing the organization. Gone is the command and control mindset that bestows unimpeachable powers of problem solving upon those in leadership positions (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001; Kanter, 1989).

More and more empirical evidence demonstrates the link between learning, collaboration, and performance outcomes (Fenning, 2004). Therefore, it becomes vital to the health of the organization that senior leaders take an aggressive approach to driving from "pockets of learning" to a true learning organization. A key competency of emerging leaders will be their ability to institutionalize a learning mindset (Brown & Posner, 2001). In fact, a study of senior executives suggests that the future success of the organization will depend heavily on the ability of leaders at all levels to collaborate and focus on the team rather than themselves. Whereas 97% of those studied agreed that collaboration was vital, only 47% reported that they had skilled collaborators in their ranks. Interestingly, skilled collaborators were identified by their ability to build relationships, collaborate, and innovate, all characteristics executives found fundamental to building an organizational culture that could withstand the pace of change and competition (Criswell & Martin, 2007). Small wonder that a poll of 240 readers of an online leadership newsletter identified building relationships and managing change as, by far, the most important lea-

dership skills they needed in order to be successful in their organization (Center for Creative Leadership, 2007).

In a knowledge-based economy, people are the prime determinants of organizational success and in fast-paced environments, organizations must depend on employees to act in alignment with corporate objectives and drive innovation (Holton , 2001). This means that leaders must be effective in setting direction and clearly defining a "line of sight" from their objectives to employee work products. In addition to this "visioning", employees need to be given a reason to care about the challenge to perform (Waclawski, 2002). Known in many venues as "engagement", employees' connections to their organizations are driven by their connections to their co-workers, hence motivation and loyalty are a reflection of the attachments and commitments people feel to co-workers and project teams or work groups. Specifically, a culture of collaboration and collegiality is an antecedent of engagement and performance (Royal & Agnew, 2006). However, a recent study found that the organizational fundamentals that support innovation are surprisingly scarce given the sometimes-desperate environments companies may face in light of extreme competition or cost pressures. Of a sampling of approximately 1.2 million employees, only half felt that the company culture encouraged cooperation and idea or resource sharing across the organization (Hay Group, 2005).

Organizational Learning

An organization that wishes to innovate effectively needs to encourage its members to generate many ideas, evaluate them, develop the ones with potential and implement the ideas with the most promise of meeting organizational objectives. This means that the organization must put in place the culture, processes and enablers to support

learning. Hence, innovation or competitive advantage is a product of organizational

learning (Ng, 2004). According to Senge (1990), a learning organization is one in which

"people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where

new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set

free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3). This defini-

tion extends to include an organization that not only creates or acquires information but

also transfers that knowledge and most importantly can modify its behavior in a fashion

that reflects and leverages new learning (Garvin, 1993).

When an organization can remain focused on a strong market orientation and

building a vibrant learning culture, competitive advantage is the result (Robison, 2007).

This includes a learning orientation characterized by adhering less rigidly to its mental

models, theories-in-use, or "that's the way we do things here". Making this shift must be

supported by a reward system that recognizes learning and managers or leaders who

model learning behavior.

Collaboration

Organizational performance, or the degree to which an organization achieves its

objectives, might be measured by organizational learning, profitability, or other benefits.

So the question becomes how well an organization can create, share, and leverage know-

ledge as the foundation of organizational advantage (Lee & Choi, 2003). To that end,

learning communities, or communities of practice, have become more common within

companies and across organizations as a way to improve the efficacy of organizational

learning (Holton, 2001). As groups of people coming together, they share problems, in-

sights, and best practices for the purpose of eliciting stronger solutions in support of in-

novation. This type of collaborative approach to learning is characterized by knowledge sharing based on relationships with others (Dodgson, 1993; Fenning, 2004).

The old paradigm of demonstrating one's worth based solely on individual performance and knowledge acquisition has moved aside for a more inclusive and collaborative way of thinking. Teams, not individuals, are the basic "learning unit" of organizations seeking to compete effectively (Senge, 1990). The use of teams to attack and solve a variety of business issues and opportunities requires a more collaborative approach to learning, often among team members or colleagues who work in a different town, state or even country. Equipping their employees to be effective in this new environment can be challenging, especially in times of economic uncertainty when corporate funding for in-house organizational development or learning specialists can range from slim to non-existent. In those cases, the task of preparing employees for a new learning paradigm may fall on the academic community (Holton, 2001).

Regardless of the venue for collaborative learning, several foundational factors affect the success of collaborative efforts. Trust between individuals or among group members is essential for a productive relationship (Coopey, 1998). Sensing that another is being overly opportunistic, devious, or manipulative makes the full cooperation and participation of others extremely unlikely (Kelly, Schaan, & Jones, 2002; Lewin & Koza, 1998). A key driver in establishing and sustaining that trust bond is the quality and frequency of communication, as it is central to establishing common expectations regarding goals and objectives (Mohr & Spekman, 1994).

Relationships & Trust

As relationships develop, knowledge is transferred; hence, the social aspect of learning becomes apparent (Birchall & Giambona, 2007; Stein & Imel, 2002). According to several researchers, driving this social interaction that enables the collaborative learning community is trust. It is trust that positions groups to work more effectively, with greater creativity, within a more supportive environment. The information flow generated by trust-driven relationships enhances the problem solving process (Brunard & Kleiner, 1994; Handy, 1995; Lipnack & Stamps, 1999).

Depending on the discipline (e.g., sociology, psychology), trust can be viewed as a general disposition toward others, or a rational decision about cooperative behavior, or an affect-based assessment of another person. However, these viewpoints converge on the fact that trust is demonstrated by an intention to be vulnerable based on positive expectations of the behavior or intentions of another. This implies a dyad as the basic social unit so a person's expectations regarding the trustworthiness of another are based upon themselves (trustor), the other (trustee), and their relationship. Critical to the state of that relationship is the frequency of communication between them (Becerra & Gupta, 2003).

Trust is strengthened by factors such as collective identity, proximity of individuals, shared values and common goals. The degree to which a learning community meets these pre-conditions to trust and collaborative learning will have a direct effect on the achievement of desired outcomes (Holton, 2001). In fact, communication to the extent of what is described as "deep dialogue" begins a cumulative cycle of communication, trust building, and knowledge acquisition (Birchall & Giambona, 2007). Additional factors

found to aid emergent trust in-group interactions include group homogeneity, a social network, small group size, and stability or lack of change, especially in-group member-ship (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). In an academic setting, this requires a pedagogical approach that fosters emotional engagement in students by developing close relationships between students and their peers (Akridge, Demay, Braunlich, Collura, & Sheahan, 2007; Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002). Mishra and Morrissey (1990) summarize; "Trust is an essential ingredient in constructive human relationships … a trusting climate is one in which people feel free to share ideas, disclose feeling, and work for common goals in a participative manner" (p. 444).

Cohorts

Competition and innovation, learning and collaboration, relationships and trust; the interrelationships of these concepts are the path to organizational success, but will not always happen; hence the need to approach organizational learning in a purposeful way. Cohort learning has emerged as an approach that will help organizations meet their innovation objectives (Haltiwanger & Ferdig, 2003). The cohort approach has demonstrated considerable promise in undergraduate and graduate education. The approach can vary in duration, but primarily entails a group of students progressing through a sequence of courses together. This might range from a semester of common classes at the undergraduate level, sometimes referred to as the "first year experience", to remaining together for the full sequence of courses at the graduate level (Jaffee, 2007; McCarthy, Trenga, & Weitner, 2005; Smith, 2007). An important learning outcome that correlates positively with the use of cohorts is retention, possibly because of a cohort's potential to meet a

student's need for affiliation. This retention outcome spans undergraduate, graduate, commuter, and online environments (Maher, 2005).

A key outcome of the cohort-learning model is the level of collaborative learning that occurs both by chance or design. At the undergraduate level, students often have assignments that require teamwork and may often engage in dialogue that features differences in perspectives and leads to shared understanding (Potts & Schultz, 2008). However, it is at the graduate level that the cohort experience provides the most robust learning outcomes (Stein & Imel, 2002) and might even be designated a "collaborative cohort" program. First, graduate cohort programs tend to be of longer duration with a common course sequence. Because students in these programs are together for an extended period of a year or more for all of their coursework, they are able to establish stronger relationships (Mello, 2003) and develop a level of trust that would be difficult to duplicate in other learning environments, since the trust relationship develops over time (Maher, 2005). Secondly, cohort programs at the graduate level feature a greater degree of dialogue and collaborative assignments. This structure tends to align most favorably with the basic needs of adult learners in that it takes advantage of their motivation to learn, facilitates the leveraging of personal experience, and encourages learning that can be applied to the learner's profession (Fallahi & Gulley, 2004; Husson & Kennedy, 2003).

Graduate programs, especially in education and business have implemented a "closed cohort" structure that features a group of students who progress through the entire course of study together (see Appendix A for a list of programs). In this format, the cohort moves through the sequence of courses in "lock step" fashion. The closed cohort

provides benefits at many levels, including administrative aspects such as classroom space and faculty assignments since the resource needs are predictable in advance (Stinson, 2004). The venue for these cohorts most often involves face-to-face interaction, although this approach is also making inroads into online learning programs (Holton, 2001).

Competencies such as emotional intelligence, social intelligence and cognitive intelligence are predictors of leader or manager professional performance (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Emotional intelligence competencies refer to how well a person is aware himself/herself, able to manage his/her own emotions, aware of others and their emotions, and able to use emotional intelligence to manage relationships. Problem solving and systems thinking are key cognitive intelligence competencies. Social intelligence competencies include interpersonal abilities like sociability, cooperation, and thoughtfulness (Boyatzis, 2006). These outcomes were often lacking in the traditional, quantitatively oriented Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs, spurring a move toward cohorts and collaborative learning environments (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008). Some important outcomes of the cohort in general and the closed cohort in particular, center on the development of these competencies and are the result of pedagogies that are successful in promoting a collaborative learning environment (Boyatzis, 2006). Thus higher education's use of closed-cohorts as a means of improving students/employees' ability to collaborate will help to close the gap organizations are facing. This study centers on a master's-level degree program that features a set group of students (closed cohort) who progress in unison through a 20-month, face-to-face curriculum.

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The Research Setting

The context of this investigation centers on cohorts of students enrolled in a master's program in executive leadership that consists of a sequence of ten courses through which a cohort progresses in unison over a period of approximately twenty months. To maintain anonymity, the institution will be referred to as Grassland State University (GSU). Students range in age from the 20s to 50s and come from careers in the private and public sectors such as government, healthcare, industry, and non-profit agencies. Classes meet once a week for four hours. A meal is provided by the school beginning an hour before class starts. This provides the cohort the opportunity to enjoy dinner together and socialize. The program provides a blend of theoretical and practical perspectives on leadership with an emphasis on ethics and moral philosophy. As a cohort, faculty and students are encouraged to utilize teamwork and collaboration in their approach to learning (GSU, 2008).

Self reflection is an important part of this master's program and is promoted throughout as students participate in a variety of exercises and personality profiles such as the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs-Myers & Briggs, 1985), the DiSC profile, and the Gallup StrengthsFinder (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) . These assessments also serve the important purpose of sensitizing students to the presence of diversity and the origin of other personality types, perspectives, and worldviews. The faculty considers this knowledge fundamental to success in the closed cohort.

The institution is a private, Catholic university whose pedagogical roots are in the Lasallian tradition of providing education as a means of developing personal dignity for "the well-being of each student as well as for the well-being of our society". In the interest of full disclosure, this researcher is an adjunct instructor of the fifth course in the sequence, *Building Effective Teams*. He has worked with every cohort since the program's inception. The purpose of the study is to explore the relationship between the closed cohort-learning model and the development of trust, communication and collaborative learning.

Conclusion

For successful organizations, innovation is at the forefront of success. Since all groups seek better ways of innovating while conserving resources such as money and talent (Huber Institute, 2002), the solution is often to bring together groups or teams of people to create and innovate (Brunard & Kleiner, 1994). The challenge is in how to create an environment that promotes the collaborative behavior that drives real innovation (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001; Senge, 1990). Much attention has been given to the role that trust plays in establishing collaborative interaction that is basic to a vibrant learning culture and how trust can be a function of the time people spend together (Mello, 2003). Such an environment is evident in the cohort-learning model becoming popular in many higher education programs such as the executive MBA. Thus, it may be possible to understand more precisely the trust-outcome relationship and how to create the environment that maximizes both (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). If so, closed-cohort programs will be an important part of preparing students for a more productive role in their work environ-

ments. This study will investigate the ability of students to improve collaboration and

learning as trust and communications develop in a closed cohort.

Literature Review

The Innovation Challenge

McKinsey and Company's Performance Leadership Survey attempts to correlate the common organizational outcomes of strategy execution and competitive advantage to identifiable management practices. Key findings from 115,000 participants confirm that the most effective way to promote high-performance behavior is to emphasize openness and trust among employees so that innovation, initiative and creativity are supported by collaborative learning environments (Leslie, Loch, & Schaninger, 2006). As organizations attempt to meet the challenges of change through innovation, the development of new organizational structures, systems and processes will support opportunities for individual and organizational learning. In turn, the learning that occurs drives and supports such development (Laverie, Madhavaram, & McDonald, 2008). Although an organization will attempt to acquire the knowledge necessary to meet its strategic objectives, developing and maintaining a learning perspective is seen as a long-term endeavor, which contrasts unfavorably with the more common short-term corporate mindset (Paparoidamis, 2005). Because the link between innovation and organizational learning is so vital, equipping employees to learn and innovate is a gap that must be closed (Calantone, Cavusgil, & Zhao, 2002).

Fostering Collaboration and Innovation

Some research has suggested that more than half of the difference in innovation in organizations is attributable to learning culture and creative climate (Hay Group, 2005B). Further, of these two, the learning culture has a significantly stronger relationship with

innovation than the organizational creative climate (Ismail, 2005). If this is true, then achieving the competitive positioning that fosters innovation depends on a deliberate effort by leadership to establish a strong and visible commitment to workplace learning (Johnston & Hawke, 2002). To this end, organizations have fostered the use of cross-functional teams because of the positive impact on both product performance and time to market for new products that result from combining the multiple perspectives of several functional groups (Roberts, 1995). Therefore, learning of a collaborative nature is a key lever in maintaining a firm's competitive stature and leadership must demonstrate trust and integrity in support of such an organizational culture (Speechley, 2005).

Organizational change carries both a content aspect, whether competitive, regulatory, or cost pressures, and a human aspect in terms of attitudes and reactions. Change can often be unsettling and the normal reaction centers on "What does this mean for me?" Perhaps most important is whether an employee has an opportunity to influence the outcome of the changes or influences on their organization (Schraeder, 2004). This opportunity to influence can depend a great deal on the organization's culture and is manifested in an individual's or organization's readiness to change. It has been suggested that the personal resiliency to respond to change has a direct impact on the potential for positive personal or organizational change. Deemed "margin in life" by McClusky (1990), employees must have a source of energy or "power" that compensates for the "load" of stress or challenge that one faces. Providing employees the opportunity or responsibility to deal directly with change could provide such "power" in the form of openness to change, a powerful factor that is demonstrated by an employee's willingness to work to-

ward organizational change goals. Because high change is inherently high risk, trust is an organizational variable that is critical for successful change (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004).

Encouraging learning is an important venue by which managers can make tangible strides toward building this trust. Such behavior on the part of managers can reduce the sense of loss of control that accompanies times of change and uncertainty to the point that employees' competence levels, decision-making and problem solving all improve (Bennett, 2003). This support for learning as the eventual catalyst for innovation and improving the competitive posture of the organization appears to begin what could be described as an upward spiral of trust and cooperation as employees progress through phases of acceptance and provide increasing levels of support for organizational goals (Schraeder, Tears, & Jordan, 2005; Weber & Weber, 2001). Specifically, manager behaviors that involve obvious attention to employee needs and concerns have a direct relationship to such outcomes as customer satisfaction, productivity and profit (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002). The more this individual level of interaction between managers and employees mirrors the overall organizational culture of providing challenge and support, the greater the occurrence of creativity, collaboration, and engagement as employees work toward a future that attracts them (Gill, 2003; Leslie et al., 2006). This is exactly the learning environment that many MBA programs have sought to create as they have moved to cohort-based programs that foster personal and social development in addition to the quantitative aspects of graduate management education (Akridge et al., 2007; Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008; Stinson, 2004).

Collaboration through Organizational Learning

As globalization and the acceleration of technology continue to re-define work and the workplace, the skills needed to sustain employment at the individual level and compete at the organizational level have evolved to become increasingly knowledge-based. As knowledge becomes more technical, the capability to engage in ongoing learning becomes essential (Casey, 1999; Kowalczyk, 2006).

Concerning organizational learning in general, it is important to ascertain what outcomes actually determine if "real" learning is taking place. On one hand if we assume that organizational learning is an intentional process undertaken specifically to improve effectiveness, then it might follow that an enhancement of organizational effectiveness must be demonstrated to support the supposition that organizational learning has occurred. Such an outlook is unnecessarily restrictive and potentially false. It ignores the possibility that some organizational learning could be serendipitous, a by-product of the initial path of inquiry, and equally valuable (Bower & Hilgard, 1981). In addition, a learner's or organization's effectiveness (or potential effectiveness) is not always impacted by learning, nor does learning necessarily result in observable changes in behavior (Huber, 1991). A more likely perspective is that learning extends the range of possible behaviors through new insights that have no observable immediate application. Extending further then, organizational learning occurs if any of its members acquires knowledge that is recognized as potentially useful to the organization. The most promising venue for determining the potential for such learning is in a collaborative setting where ideas can be aired and tested in a "safe" setting as developed by numerous graduate programs utilizing

a cohort learning model (Legge, Taylor, & Wilson, 2005; Pferdehirt, Smith, & Al-Ashkar, 2005).

Learning is an active process that involves the learner interacting with the world. In actuality, people learn to learn as they learn, a progressive, usually cumulative body of knowledge and the capacity to acquire more. Central to the ability to learn is the fact that learning happens in the mind. Hands on experience and other action learning contexts help the learner to take in knowledge, but it is reflection that elucidates the life-long process of making meaning by the individual (Kegan, 1994). Most important to this study is the concept that learning is often a social activity in that our learning is intimately associated with our connection with other people. Hence, communication – interaction with others – must be part of the context in which learning is to occur if it is to have any real applicability to the world instead of a collection of isolated facts and ideas. Learning is not instantaneous so having the time to learn is important. Moreover, all these factors are more or less moot without the motivation to learn and having the opportunity to apply knowledge, to leverage it in some way supports such personal motivation (Hein, 1991).

The Cohort Learning Model

With the pace of work and the cost pressures imposed by dwindling profits, the corporate world often leaves the development of a meaningful approach to learning to the educational community. Meeting this challenge requires higher education faculty and staff to develop new, more effective ways to reshape their approaches to teaching and learning (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004; Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002). Classroom practices do have the ability to improve student learning. Faculty interest in students and prompt feedback, academic challenge and integrating experience, and meaningful inte-

ractions with diverse peers, can positively influence academic motivation, critical thinking, and an appreciation for diversity, among other desired outcomes (Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, 2008). In other words, improving outcomes depends on deliberate effort on the part of faculty, with the direct support of administration primarily in the form of professional development programs that highlight emerging teaching and learning methods. In this way student learning is improved by a faculty of critical practitioners focused on effective classroom practices (Reder, 2007).

The use of cohort education has been undergoing a rebirth over the past several years for a multitude of reasons. On one hand, cohorts are easier to administer and plan than traditional enrollment models (Maher, 2005). At the undergraduate level, schools form incoming freshmen together in a group that has some or all of their first semester classes together, partially because it seems that the cohort model improves retention in these student groups (Potts & Schultz, 2008). This retention effect at the undergraduate level, especially for those "traditional" college-age students, currently referred to as "Millenials" is due to the tendency of this generation to gravitate toward group activities and appreciate teamwork (McGlynn, 2005). Retention and group-based learning can also develop at the graduate level (LaPointe & Davis, 2006) where cohorts are together for long periods, generally the duration of the course of study. This approach makes it easier for administrators to utilize faculty and other resources, since the many cohorts proceed in lock step through the curriculum. This extended period of educational "togetherness" tends to lead to a level of camaraderie that is less common in other approaches.

Common themes in many graduate programs include students' desire for relevant course content and the opportunity to leverage and expand personal experience resulting

in direct application to students' work environments (Currie & Knights, 2003; Stinson, 2004). It appears that in addition to understanding new topics and best practices, learning to learn collaboratively is perhaps the most important outcome of such programs (Bocchi et al., 2004; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). Although employees in almost any industry work in project teams, work groups, or other group endeavors, the focus is primarily on the objective not the method for attaining it. Germane to the cohorts examined in this study is the suggestion that, within a pedagogical or learning community, the students who take advantage of the opportunity to develop and improve personal, social and academic skills could be better equipped to form similar learning communities in their work settings (Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Cohort Structure

In higher education, cohorts are generally defined as a group of students who begin an academic program together and share a common course sequence, instructors, and learning activities in pursuit of a specific degree or certification (Holmes, Birds, Seay, Smith, & Wilson, 2008). Most often synonymous with the cohort experience at a graduate level is an instructional culture that is collaborative and featuring a network of academic and social support. The outcomes of a graduate cohort include the social and professional development of the participants (McCarthy et al., 2005; Sathe, 2009). Structurally, cohorts have three basic formats, closed, open or fluid. In a closed format, students take courses together and no new students can join. An open cohort allows students to take courses outside the cohort course or courses. A fluid cohort structure allows students to drop or join at any time. Another difference from cohort students is that traditional students tend to carry four or five courses at a time where adult cohorts generally

take just one course in a condensed time-period, perhaps 6-8 weeks (Potthoff, Frederickson, Batenhorst, & Tracy, 2001).

A Google search of "cohort MBAs" shows the format to be in use in a number of MBA and other graduate programs that have increasingly employed the closed cohort model in addition to non-cohort formats. Cohort MBA programs generally require work experience (Bocchi et al., 2004) as an entrance requirement. According to Northeastern University (2009), executive MBA programs in the United States have an average age of 36 and an average work experience of 12 years. This study will focus on an example of a master's level, closed-cohort model.

Cohort Learning

More important than the administrative advantages of the cohort model is the way in which cohort learning meets the need to shift learning environments from teaching focused to learning focused. Cohorts are effective in integrating experiential and academic learning in a way that improves learning outcomes (Guskin & Marcy, 2003). Cohorts actually represent a subset of the broader category of learning communities or communities of practice in that all generally seek a culture of collaborative learning, but the latter with less formality of structure and duration (Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). As communities begin to form, so do traits such as traditions, mores, and culture. As a community, cohorts enjoy the advantage of smaller sizes and static membership, factors that can influence the development of trust and communication which are foundational to collaborative learning relationships. For example, a closed-cohort program at the doctoral level formed to improve dissertation completion rates found that collaboration resulted

in unprecedented levels of mutual learning characterized by shared perspectives and the exchange of knowledge (Holmes et al., 2008).

Successful cohorts seem to share several characteristics. One is that cohorts must purposely establish a collaborative, cohesive environment that encourages the personal development of its members based on an evolving and growing level of mutual respect. As the level of open communication grows, so too does the willingness to take risks, engage in critical reflection, and participate in the shared understanding that comes with embracing multiple perspectives (Brooks, 1998). A study of top programs for developing school principals found that compared to a control group of principal preparation programs of study, a cohort learning structure was a determining factor in key outcomes such as leadership, confidence in leading change, and participation in continuing professional development (LaPointe & Davis, 2006).

Overall, it appears that student learning increases in relation to increased opportunities for teamwork and collaboration and even more so in the cohort context due to deeper levels of socialization, especially reflection and critical inquiry (Chairs, McDonald, & Shroyer, 2002; Yerkes, 1995). The advantages of the cohort model tend to include mutual intellectual and academic stimulation featuring the sharing and critiquing of ideas and work products in a learning environment supported by the development of encouraging social ties and interaction (Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001).

Trust in Cohorts

At the highest organizational level, alliances between business partners can attribute much of the success of that alliance to the degree of mutual trust, where trust is characterized by each partner's interest in the welfare of the other or at the least, not behaving in a

self-interested manner (Madhok, 1995). Even at this level, trust is a social phenomenon and as such, it is unlikely that partners suspend their self-interest any more in an alliance than in intra-organization settings such as teams or work groups. Instead, successful alliances create processes that align interests so that cooperation evolves naturally (Koza & Lewin, 1998). It is suggested that behavioral characteristics that contribute to partnership success include, (1) attributes of the partnership such as trust and commitment, (2) communication behaviors such as the level of information sharing, and (3) conflict resolution techniques such as joint problem solving. Trust is the antecedent of other behavioral characteristics in that a lack of trust will have a deleterious effect on information exchange, reciprocity of influence, and joint problem solving (Mohr & Spekman, 1994).

Internal trust, or the climate of trust within organizations, has a number of important benefits for the enterprise and its members. Internal trust is the positive expectations that individuals have about the intent and behaviors of organizational members (Huff & Kelley, 2003). Trust has a direct effect on such critical organizational phenomena as communication, conflict management, satisfaction, and performance (both individual and work unit). In addition, trust has an enabling effect in that it creates or enhances the conditions that are conducive to obtaining organizational outcomes like cooperation, collaboration, and higher performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001).

Fundamental to the purpose of an organization is the need to attain goals through the coordinating of resources, primarily people. The subdivision of work and responsibilities introduces uncertainty as the result of the need for interdependence among employees. Organizing principles, the logic by which work is coordinated and information is managed, address uncertainty. Some researchers (McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003)

suggest that trust is an organizing principle in that it shapes the relatively stable and enduring interaction patterns in organizations and trust motivates members to contribute, combine, and coordinate resources toward a common objective.

At the individual level, people seek a trusting climate where ideas and feelings can be freely shared and they can work for common goals in a participative manner. High trust persons believe others are motivated by unselfish concerns and that there will be reciprocity of positive behavior (Brunard & Kleiner, 1994). At a minimum, trust in a work setting (e.g. cross-functional team) is represented by "confidence" in others that is based on their demonstrated competence and commitment. If we have reason to believe that workers are technically and/or functionally competent, and they have shown themselves to have a high level of commitment to the common objectives, our confidence provides the foundation for cooperation and trust to be self-perpetuating (Handy, 1995). Moving toward such an enhanced trusting relationship depends on an individual's (trustor) perception of the other's (trustee) trustworthiness. Assessing another's trustworthiness is based on the trustor's attitude toward the trustee and their relationship within an organizational structure. However, these factors are moderated by the frequency of communication between the two. As communications increase, the general predisposition toward the trustee loses relevance as it is replaced by experience (Becerra & Gupta, 2003).

Communication in Cohorts

Interaction and communication are fundamental to a collaborative environment and the cohort experience supports an interactive and open setting featuring an uncommon level of shared ideas and perspectives (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000;

Fenning, 2004; International Labor Office, 2007). In fact, cohort members form networks based on collaboration and communication (Haltiwanger & Ferdig, 2003; Pferdehirt et al., 2005). In a three cohort program for diversity education for college faculty with a three semester duration, participants reported strong levels of personal growth, application to teaching, and application to personal life that they attributed to the communication and collaboration of their cohorts (Potthoff, Dinsmore, & Moore, 2001). Because group dynamics are an important component of learning cohorts, the trust, honesty, and openness that drive effective communications can flourish (Brooks, 1998). Frequent communications supported by a high level of trust are indicators of a group's cohesiveness and its ability to work collaboratively (Newell, Adams, & Crary, 2005). A group's ability to communicate and to discuss issues and form conclusions predicts the quality of the learning outcomes (Mealman & Lawrence, 2000). The resulting cohesiveness of the cohort, compared to other learning environments, leads to stronger and more inclusive communication networks that support improved group and individual performance (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Research into the teacher-student communication relationship and its connection to student motivation and performance suggest such variables as immediacy, communicator style, affinity seeking, and caring impact learning. Immediacy, or actions that decrease the physical or psychological distance between individuals with respect to communication behavior, is related to student performance (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Examples of immediacy include verbal behaviors such as encouraging feedback and soliciting opinions of others as well as nonverbal behaviors like eye contact, facial expressions and tone of voice. Such positive interaction creates a more open learning environment

(Barnett et al., 2000). In addition, immediacy behaviors are closely linked to liking, or the drawing of individuals to someone or something they find attractive. This interest stimulates memory, recognition and involvement (Robinson, 2007). In the graduate-level cohort context, immediacy behaviors are exhibited as much or more by cohort members (Mealman & Lawrence, 2000) than by the instructor. Adult learners have a high need for affiliation and value learning that builds on past experience and allows them to be actively involved in the learning process. Because closed-cohort members report a sense of belonging, opportunities to collaborate, and a stronger ability to reflect on practice, they exit with a heightened sense of professional confidence (Chairs et al., 2002).

Cautions Regarding the Cohort Learning Model

Even as the literature strongly supports the collaborative nature of cohorts and extols the quality of the learning experience, there are those who point to the counter-productive potential of this environment. Personality or cultural differences that are not reconciled at the outset or shortly after the cohort forms can detract from the positive outcomes a cohort can obtain. This might lead to resistance among cohort members to form the relationships necessary to establish the highly-collaborative learning environment that supports the cohort experience. The result would be an educational experience similar to traditional teaching models (McCarthy et al., 2005). At the extreme, the cohort can totally break down to the point that students become angry, scared and degraded by verbal attacks and other disrespectful behavior of their classmates (Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). Thus, team cultures of cohorts are not uniformly positive and in fact can be at the extremes of highly supportive or very dysfunctional, characterized by competitiveness and scapegoating (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). At the heart of collaboration, co-

operation and trust must be developed and enhanced throughout the duration of the co-hort. It is the explicit intent of this study to investigate the growth of trust and effective communication across the time span of a cohort program.

Cohorts in Graduate Education

An academic area that utilizes the cohort-learning model extensively is education, primarily teacher preparation at the undergraduate level and educational leadership at the graduate level. In a 1994 survey of educational administration/leadership programs, more than half of the 254 institutions included cohorts in their doctoral programs (McCarthy & Kuh, 1997). Further, a later study of educational administrative programs in the United States and Canada found an implementation rate of 63% of the 223 res-ponding institutions (Barnett et al., 2000). As implemented, these cohort models tend to resemble the model that provides the strongest outcomes in both deep learning and career impact: a set group of students who progress through the curriculum together.

The most important benefits from the cohort model in educational leadership and MBA programs are how students are influenced by the experience and center on two per-sonal, but cohort-influenced outcomes; the student learning experience and the influence on leadership practice in the workplace (Harold & Stephenson, 2007; Legge et al., 2005). The influence of group dynamics is at the heart of the power of the cohort model where members of an effective group report feeling important, having a sense of community and are being appreciated for their expertise and willingness to share experiences (Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002; Stinson, 2004). Cohort learning in graduate programs is characterized by collaboration that requires mutual interaction and interdependence (Currie & Knights, 2003; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006; Willis & Tucker, 2003). Because adults learn best when

they can direct their own learning influenced by their experiential background and focus on problems relevant to practice and build strong relationships with peers (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), their academic performance and interpersonal relationships are likely to be positively influenced by the cohort structure (Barnett et al., 2000; Bocchi et al., 2004).

Learning Outcomes

Higher education institutions are responding to calls for accountability by spending more time assessing the quality of teaching and learning (Guskin & Marcy, 2003). This is done primarily by assessing learning outcomes. For the purposes of this study, learning outcomes refer to the personal changes or benefits that occur because of the learning opportunities offered by an institution. Learning outcomes are not driven entirely by an institution's quality of education, but are also a function of students' active engagement with the learning opportunities (Astin, 1984). Outcomes describe what the student actually achieves, as opposed to what the institution intends to teach (Nusche, 2008). Learning has many dimensions and measuring some outcomes is easier than others (Donaldson & Petersen, 2007). Most assessment efforts focus on cognitive outcomes, which include both the recall or recognition of knowledge and the development of intellectual abilities and skills. A continuum of cognitive learning outcomes could span from subject-specific knowledge to general reasoning and problem solving skill.

Non-cognitive outcomes include changes in beliefs or the development of certain values, and the most frequently assessed relate to psychosocial development, attitudes, and values. Psychosocial development includes personal aspects such as identity development and self-esteem and relational aspects such as relationships with other students

(Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). Such relational outcomes include interpersonal and intercultural skills, while attitudinal and value outcomes may include social responsibility and an enhanced understanding of diversity (Volkwein, 2003). By their nature, non-cognitive outcomes are difficult to measure by direct means such as behavioral data, and instead are generally measured indirectly by surveys, including student self-reports (Nusche, 2008).

The Case for Cohorts

The pervasiveness of cohort learning in higher education in general and graduate programs in particular speaks to the importance of continued research and understanding of this pedagogical approach. Several factors seem to have created a perfect storm for the implementation of this approach. First, the closed-cohort featuring lock-step course progression makes allocation of faculty and other resources much more predictable and cost effective. The possibility that cohorts support higher retention rates has a positive effect on revenue at a time when schools are counting every penny. Because graduate students in such fields as business and education are most often holding full-time jobs and span all age groups, these adult learners are seeking program content that values and builds on their own experience and provides learning that can be applied directly to their work environment (Caffarella, 2002). This speaks to a learning environment where meaning is socially constructed through the power of collaborative learning, an approach to problem solving and innovation that can and should be in the workplace (Gherardi, Nicolini, & Odella, 1998; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). This study will extend the research on the cohort-learning model by investigating the antecedents of trust and communication as influenced by the closed cohort.

Chapter 3

Methodology

With the globalization of the world's economy and the onset of a playing field that has become wider and deeper, competition has taken on a new dimension (Wheatley, 1997). Market forces a half a day and a half a world away have dramatic impact on stock prices in the United States and the economic outlook for the near future. The need to innovate quicker and better brings to mind the quote by a 19th century cavalry officer that his job was to "get there the fastest with the mostest". So as organizations spur employees to innovate, it becomes obvious that the most desirable learning environment must provide the best solutions in the shortest time frame (Schraeder et al., 2005).

Collaborative learning and problem solving are the best hope for innovation (Gherardi et al., 1998) that will position an organization for success, but effective collaborative relationships develop over time and represent a change in worldview for many employees (Harold & Stephenson, 2007). The need for building the necessary social and collaborative skills (Buchowicz & Buchanan, 2008) has not been lost on the higher education community as major revisions have been made to curriculum and format to address those needs (Guskin & Marcy, 2003). This shift is very evident at the graduate level, especially in the disciplines of business and education (Willis & Tucker, 2003). Curricula that feature collaborative assignments and cohort-based classes aim directly at the need to develop professionals who can collaborate and innovate more effectively (Pferdehirt, 2005).

However, even as higher education institutions and their students extol the effectiveness of the new closed-cohort learning environment and the research supports such

claims (Barnett et al., 2000), little is known about the most basic antecedents of delivering such satisfactory learning outcomes. Specifically the role that trust and communication play in supporting a new learning paradigm must be understood if such programs are to improve. These characteristics are understood to be necessary and generally assumed to be present (McEvily et al., 2003; Newell, et al., 2005), especially in the lock step, closed-cohort learning model, but there is little empirical evidence to support this. This study will extend the research by demonstrating the relationship between trust and communication and collaborative learning skills as they develop in a closed cohort-learning context by examining:

Research question 1: How does a closed cohort environment influence the development of trust?

Research Question 2: How does a closed cohort influence the quantity and quality of communication?

Research Question 3: How does a closed cohort influence the ability to work collaboratively?

Research Approach

Graduate students want programs that value their experience or worldview and provide learning that applies to their careers. A learning approach that uses personal experience to make meaning from their present context and that views learning as "constructing" meaning is known as constructivist learning (Kegan, 1994; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Within the constructivist paradigm there is some debate as to whether learning occurs primarily on an individual basis or as the result of interaction with others (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The interactive nature of cohort programs means that stu-

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dent learning relies heavily on socialization. In other words, meaning in the cohort context is largely socially constructed. A social constructivist learning approach is one that emphasizes personal development and the use of community (Stinson, 2004).

As a learning outcome, the social aspects of learning are non-cognitive in nature and include interpersonal and intercultural skills that influence the peer-to-peer relationships so important to collaborative learning and which the closed-cohort model develops more successfully than other learning contexts (Baldwin, Bedell, & Johnson, 1997). There is little support for non-cognitive outcomes being accurately measured using behavioral data (Nusche, 2008). Instead, they are most often assessed using surveys or questionnaires, quite often including student self-reporting (Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002).

This study explores the success of the closed cohort-learning model at building a level of trust and communication that enhances learning outcomes, namely the ability to collaborate effectively. Consequently, it is necessary to use an approach that captures, in as much detail as possible, personal experience, benefits and feelings (Drummond, 2003). It is necessary to focus on how students make sense of the cohort experience and how it possibly transforms that experience into their consciousness, both personally and collectively. This necessitates a methodology that thoroughly captures and describes how people experience a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The qualitative research methodology known as phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the people involved (Tissington, 2006). In addition, this methodology recognizes that researchers cannot be divorced from their presuppositions (Groenewald, 2004). This methodology seems particularly congruent with the researcher's long-term involvement with the cohort concept and fascination with what appeared as an effective pedagogy.

Research Design

Because of the nature of the topic under study and the supposition that meaning or learning is socially constructed, a group interview or focus group format was used. (Rabiee, 2004). The focus group is a form of group interview that places great importance on a high level of interaction among the participants and, in fact, attempts to promote self-disclosure among participants (Freeman, 2006). Because phenomenological reflection, or discerning the sense or meaning of an experience, is retrospective, the focus group is especially appropriate in understanding the closed-cohort experience and how participants perceive and describe it in both personal and collective terms (Tissington, 2006). Other benefits of the focus group approach include information on the dynamics of attitudes and opinions of the participants because of interaction, a greater degree of spontaneity and recall as participants consider the input of others, and a greater level of support and empowerment because of group membership (Sim, 1998). In short, the focus group provides access to a large amount of data on a variety of topics directly targeted to the researcher's interests (Morgan, 1997).

To gather the data necessary to explore this phenomenon, a standardized, open-ended interview design (see Appendix B) was utilized (Wiersema & Licklider, 2007). This technique enables the interviewer to maintain a good level of focus on the research question. As mentioned by Patton (2002), "one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have *directly* experienced the phenomenon of interest" (p.104). It is common for a phenomenologist to use in-depth, semi-structured, individual or focus group interviews guided by open-ended questions to increase the probability of gathering comparable data across participants (Wiersema & Licklider, 2007).

The level of group structure used in focus groups spans a continuum from high to low. Less structured focus groups are more participant-driven in that an un-standardized interview guide and low moderator involvement allow participants to discuss topics of interest to them. The high structure focus group uses a standard interview guide and employs active moderator involvement to keep the discussion centered on the researcher's agenda. A hybrid approach known as a funnel-based interview begins with less structured or more open-ended questions before moving to a more structured discussion of specific questions (Morgan, 1997). This last approach makes it possible for participants to offer their own perspectives on the cohort experience in general as a starting point and was the approach used in this study.

Focus group size can range from six to twelve participants (Rabiee, 2004) or even five to eight participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009) with the intent to be small enough for everyone to participate but of sufficient size to promote a range of experiences and outlooks regarding the phenomenon under study (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Rabiee, 2004). When determining group size, smaller groups tend to work best when participants seem to be interested in the topic and respectful of each other. Smaller is also better when the researcher desires a clear sense of each participant's feelings and outlook on a topic. However, to ensure that the minimum of six is met, it is advisable to over-recruit to accommodate no-shows (Morgan, 1997). Because of the phenomenological nature of this study, the need to elicit in-depth insights, and the extended duration of the cohort experience, smaller groups of five to eight were appropriate (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The number of focus groups utilized is the primary determinant of the quantity of data produced. The number of focus groups necessary can vary depending on the size

of the population, the number of participants in each group, and the complexity of the research question, but tends to range from three to six (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Rabiee, 2004). The most significant factor influencing this aspect of the design is the variability of the participants both within and across groups. Also of consideration is the degree of structure in the focus groups. The more standardized the interviews and higher the level of moderator involvement, the fewer the focus groups needed (Morgan, 1997). Because the participants in each focus group were from the same cohort, and the interviews were highly structured, and there was a high level of moderator involvement, four focus groups were conducted. Krueger & Casey (2009) recommend an initial design of three to four focus groups, adding more only if the focus groups are providing new information. In consultation with the director of the program under study, the following cohorts were selected to provide candidates for the focus groups; cohort #1, cohort #3, cohort #5 and cohort #6. This was based on the assessment that these cohorts would have the greatest number of students willing to participate and share their experiences.

Setting

The University is located in the south central United States and has been recognized by *U.S. News & World Report* and the *Princeton Review* for the value of the education it provides. The student body numbers approximately 2,000 and has 55% female and 43% minority students. It offers undergraduate and graduate programs. Graduate programs are primarily in education, engineering and business. The master's degree in executive leadership was established in 2006 and has a student group that is 63% female and 48% minority. Ages ranged from the 20s to the 50s with approximately two-thirds

in their 30s and 40s. The faculty numbered about 15, mostly adjuncts and only four in-structors taught all six cohorts. The faculty profile is, over 40, half female, and 20% mi-nority.

Participants

Cohort 1 began in January 2006 and the most recent cohort 6 began in September 2008. A program evaluation with cohorts 1 and 2 was completed in 2008 that has led to a number of refinements to the program in terms of course content and faculty assignments. The cohort model that was a key part of the original program is still used. Students were surveyed by program administrators with written evaluations and focus group input (GSU, 2008b). It is of particular relevance to this research that one of the salient items to emerge from the evaluations was the importance of intra-cohort trust and its importance in the learning environment. For example, students from one cohort joined another co-hort for a few classes and the original cohort felt that trust had to be re-established, with marginal success.

The participants were selected from a master's program in executive leadership that is structured as a lock step, closed-cohort program that lasts 20 months. In contrast to the random selection process familiar to quantitative sample populations, it is impor-tant that participants in a focus group interview be willing and able to participate, thus they are a purposeful, not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population (Rabiee, 2004). There are contrasting opinions regarding sampling techniques. On one hand there is the approach of using pre-existing groups to promote a strong level of inte-raction based on the presence of trust within the group (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006), while the other approach draws participants from a broader population, thus improving the

transferability of results (Freeman, 2006). For this study, the focus groups were com-

posed of students from the same cohort. This design feature promotes more free-flowing

conversation among participants (Morgan, 1997).

All participants were volunteers and were engaged in the research within the

bounds of informed consent (see Appendix C). Such consent encompasses the purpose of

the research and the information being collected, how the information will be used, the

research process itself, what will be asked in the focus group, how confidentiality will be

protected, and the risk and or benefits associated with the research (Patton, 2002). Most

importantly, it was made clear that participants are free to withdraw from the research

process at any time and their responses will be stricken from analysis (Groenewald,

2004). These items were included in a written consent form signed by the participant and

the researcher.

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher is an adjunct instructor in the master's in leadership program. His

background includes 30 years in the private sector in management roles in the areas of

customer service, marketing, and supply chain management. He is white and over the

age of 50. He has led and worked in numerous teams and work groups and teaches the

Building Effective Teams course. It is the fourth or the fifth course in the sequence de-

pending on the cohort. This means that the cohorts had been together either 24 or 32

weeks before the *Teams* course. The researcher has taught the course for all six cohorts,

and therefore enjoys a teacher-student relationship with all program enrollees and has

consistently high student evaluations across all cohorts. It was because of the highly in-

teractive nature of the learning environment and the high level of camaraderie within the

cohorts that the researcher came to appreciate, or perhaps suspect, the potential of the closed cohort as a learning community. Consequently, the presupposition on the part of the researcher is that the extent of the bonhomie was, at least in part, the result of a high level of interpersonal trust and interaction.

In order to enhance the effectiveness of the researcher, it is first necessary to identify biases and beliefs and make explicit viewpoints of the researcher regarding the research question (Patton, 2002; Wiersema & Licklider, 2007). These presuppositions are: students are responsible for their own learning, trust promotes communication, a safe environment enhances learning, social interaction promotes collaborative learning, and students have a responsibility to contribute to the learning of others. It was important to acknowledge these biases as the questionnaire was developed and the interviews conducted in order to ensure that nothing precludes understanding the essence of the student experience (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006).

Data Collection

An email contact list was developed using contact information from the director of the master's program and the researcher's records. The researcher sent potential participants an introductory email explaining the purpose of the study and outlining what to expect, responsibilities, time commitment, and confidentiality. Participants indicated their willingness to participate with a return email. Within a week of the first email from the researcher, another email was sent to the non-responders and yielded the final four participants. Prior to the focus groups, the consent form was sent by email to the 20 individuals who agreed to participate. One participant cancelled the day of their focus group resulting in the final group of 19 focus group participants.

The data collection process can be challenging for several reasons: data must include how participants interact - not only what they say. Quotations should be attributed to individuals but the process itself should not be intrusive (Sim, 1998). In order to replicate their class experience, the focus groups were conducted in the same classroom building the students used for their classes, thus providing a familiar, comfortable setting. The room was a conference room designed to accommodate 12 people and the largest group was eight including the moderators, so seating was comfortable. Box lunches and refreshments were provided in the conference room.

Sessions were audio tape-recorded using both digital and tape recorders with external microphones and supplemented by researcher notes (Drummond, 2003; Wiersema & Licklider, 2007). Because the researcher should not engage in copious note taking in favor of staying engaged with the interview, the use of a video recorder or a note-taking assistant can be a good option (Davidson, 2009; Sim, 1998). This study used an assistant moderator who made notes to capture the interaction among participants, including nonverbal interaction. A seating chart was used (refer to Appendix E) to note how participants interact with each other and elicit dialogue (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The researcher and assistant moderator met twice before the first session and after each focus group, to review the process.

A further word regarding the importance of nonverbal or expressive behavior is in order. Expressive behavior possesses significant communicative power in that even fleeting glimpses of non-verbal behavior can offer a great deal of information. People communicate interpersonal expectancies and biases through subtle expressive behaviors that are most often unintended and unconscious (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). Nonverbal

behavior can be considered relationship language because it can often signal a change in the quality of an ongoing interpersonal exchange or relationship. Therefore, it is not surprising that expressive behavior is the primary communicator of emotion and provides the context in which verbal communications are evaluated (Ekman & Friesen, 1968). Other than the suggestion of a seating chart (Krueger & Casey, 2009), the approach of an assistant moderator taking detailed notes of participant reactions and interactions is recommended (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1997). A checklist of behaviors (see appendix D) mentioned by these authors was reviewed with the assistant moderator during a pre-interview training session.

In addition to the participants, the interview guide is a major influence on the quality of the research. For this reason, it is important to test the questions for clarity, relevance, and sequence (Patton, 2002). Such testing can include reading aloud to test whether rewording is necessary to make the questions flow well and seem conversational rather than formal (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Because it is time and labor intensive to set up a focus group, it is more desirable to be able to use the results of a focus group rather than consider it a pilot (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The researcher tested the questions with the assistant moderator as he was experienced with interview techniques and was familiar with the phenomenon under study (Abratt & Mofokeng, 2001; Morgan, 1997). Once the researcher conducted the first focus group, transcribed, and analyzed the data, the interview guide was again reviewed for possible revision before completing subsequent focus groups as suggested by Krueger and Casey (2009, p. 60). No revisions were made to the interview guide.

The data gathering process proved to be effective and enjoyable for the researcher and the participants. In every case, the camaraderie and relationships were evident as they gathered for a meal and a discussion about their experiences in the program. Although the setting and time of day were identical to their classroom experience, it is the researcher's belief that the atmosphere and interaction would have transcended a different environment. As anticipated, each group had its own personality as expressed by their experiences, but there was a common outlook regarding the value and impact of the program. Discussion generally followed the discussion guide (refer to Appendix B) although it was common for responses to span multiple areas of inquiry.

Data Analysis

Phenomenology as a research approach and the focus group as a data-gathering technique both attempt to understand a common experience through the interaction of participants (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). Interpretation of that experience is a major component of phenomenology and is essential to the understanding of the individual and shared experience under investigation (Drummond, 2003). The focus of the analysis will be the transcription of the focus group discussions. Transcription requires a transformation of sounds or video to text. This is a selective process as certain features of talk and/or interaction are included since it is impossible to transcribe all features of talk and interaction from recordings (Davidson, 2009). Creating the preliminary transcript is an opportunity for the researcher to immerse himself in the data and be open to the emergent insights that can occur. It is good practice to proof read the transcript against the recorded evidence to confirm the accuracy of the original transcript (Patton, 2002).

The researcher transcribed the recordings verbatim except that pseudonyms were substituted for the names of participants and others mentioned during the interviews.

The intent of phenomenological research is to identify themes in the data that uncover a comprehensive description of the experience as perceived by the participants (Wiersema & Licklider, 2007). Therefore, the data analysis is a process of thematic analysis that involves identification of themes or recognition of patterns as the transcript is read and re-read. This coding process identifies statements that carry experiential significance for the participants with emerging themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Specifically, the analysis began with a first reading during which notes were made on the transcript identifying topics. Subsequent readings added and modified these topics or themes. Grouping these themes into broader groups or categories was the next step from which an interpretive phase of analysis began to lead toward an understanding of the results (Patton, 2002). Reading, interpreting and grouping was an iterative approach since the interactive nature of a focus group provides a multitude of different perspectives as participants challenge and consider other points of view (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). Except for the initial reading and manual notes on the paper version of the transcripts, all subsequent analysis, coding, and grouping was done using the computer program known as NVivo version 8 from QSR International. The results of this process are included in Appendix F – Categories and Themes.

The observational data collected by the assistant moderator was followed by a debriefing with the moderator immediately following each focus group session (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). This discussion was audio taped for later review. The intent was to draw conclusions regarding the interaction of participants, one with another and the role

that expressive behaviors played in the focus group. People can carefully select their words, but are less adept at controlling their facial expressions, body movements and tone of voice. This lack of control is due in part to the fact that people cannot observe themselves as do others. In fact when verbal and nonverbal messages appear to be inconsistent, the nonverbal or expressive behaviors could be closer to the real message (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). To this end, the researcher compared the expressive behavior data to the transcripts for inconsistencies. This was facilitated by the assistant moderator's notes which captured his comments and coding for specific interactions between participants for each question on the interview guide. This approach was reasonably effective but still falls short of a video recording, an approach considered but discarded due to the intimate nature of the focus groups.

Particular interest was paid to interactions such as: one participant's comment eliciting responses from others or helping them recall their own experiences. Also noted was whether the interaction was more robust because of the willingness of participants to share and challenge each other, or did there appear to be a level of trust and communication that made the session "collaborative" (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1997).

Research Rigor

According to Patton (2002), a social constructivist approach to qualitative research requires different criteria from traditional social science, namely credibility in place of internal validity, transferability rather than external validity, dependability replacing reliability, and conformability as an analog to objectivity. Inquiry of this type should be judged by dependability – a systematic process systematically followed, and authenticity – appreciation for the perspectives of others.

The credibility of qualitative inquiry rests on three elements: rigorous methods for research that yield high-quality data that are systematically analyzed; the credibility of the researcher dependent on training, experience, and presentation of self; and a belief in the value of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). The methodology described herein adheres to both the principles of phenomenology inquiry and the focus-group process of data collection. The researcher has conducted two other qualitative studies. The first was a single subject inquiry, entitled *The Experiences of a Volunteer Prison Ministry Leader* (Ellrich, 2003) submitted as a requirement for a graduate-level qualitative analysis class. The second effort, *Leadership Training Effectiveness: The Experiences of Seminar Participants with Committing Principles to Practice*, served as the required residency project (Ellrich, 2004). This investigation was similar to the proposed study in that it employed the focus group format, and the researcher had served as an instructor in a weeklong leadership development seminar in Kabul, Afghanistan, and enjoyed a collegial relationship with the three focus group participants. In both cases, the teacher/researcher is imbedded in the experience being studied, which is an important characteristic of a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). Finally, having lived the closed cohort experience and witnessed the impact of this learning environment, it would be very difficult to develop a questionnaire or other quantitative approach that could get to the heart of this experience.

Conclusion

The closed-cohort learning model is an experiential environment that is rich in group dynamics and learning outcomes. At the graduate level, the duration of the cohort and the collaborative nature of much of the content create a very rich shared experience

of creating meaning and understanding as part of a social process (Maher, 2005; Stein & Imel, 2002). Phenomenology is a method of qualitative inquiry that examines how people make sense of experience and how that understanding develops into conscious thought (Groenewald, 2004). It prescribes a methodology that will carefully and thoroughly capture and describe how people experience a phenomenon. This most often takes the form of in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). To capitalize on the shared experience of the cohorts under study, the focus group interview methodology provides an empirical, inductive method that allows participants to express multiple understandings and meanings that reveal different perspectives to the researcher (Das, 1983). It is only from the collective formation of statements and experiences that an understanding of the phenomenon can emerge (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006). This was the basis for this investigation into the effect of the closed-cohort learning model on trust, communication and collaborative learning.

Chapter 4

Results

There have been six cohorts in this master's program in leadership. The last and only active cohort, cohort 6, will finish in July, 2010. As discussed in the methodology, four focus groups were conducted. The cohorts selected to participate in the research were deemed the most engaged in the cohort experience by the program director and the researcher. All participants in each focus group were from the same cohort. The focus groups followed this sequence: cohort 5, cohort 1, cohort 6, and cohort 4. The researcher was the moderator for all sessions and was an instructor for all six cohorts teaching the fifth of the sequence of 10 courses. Each cohort experienced seven or eight instructors during the 20-month program.

This chapter presents the key themes to emerge from each focus group while the next chapter will tie together the experiences of the four groups and identify the salient features of the cohort learning model. Participant identity is protected by pseudonyms.

Focus Group 1

Focus group 1 (cohort 5) consisted of four volunteer participants from a cohort of eight. This group experienced an exodus of students early in the program due to several factors although some severe personality clashes precipitated significant discord until the membership stabilized through the exit of the disruptive members. This experience shaped the cohort and was a major theme in their discussion for this research. Doug captured the group outlook on that part of the experience:

> Doug: We got more out of this program than any other cohort because we went through that experience and none of the other cohorts did. So we were challenged, and we had to challenge ourselves, and we were challenged individually, and we challenged each other to figure out a way to come together again after the mass

explosion. And that is something that I don't think any other cohort can step back and recount.

The Cohort Experience

When asked to describe their cohort experience, the group immediately compared it to a family. For example Sherry found "It was more like a family, a family oriented experience … I felt comfortable or at home when I was here". Kathy mentioned, "I was really reflecting on it, when we were a larger cohort I never felt that togetherness", with which Doug agreed, "I really didn't feel like I was a part of the family until after the June experience." However, although the defining event that led to this pleasant environment was a dramatic downsizing of the cohort, it was not the size that was the most important factor as evidenced by this exchange:

Moderator: "now was that more size related or people related?"

Sherry: "People"

Kathy: "People"

Doug: "People related"

And with those comments a theme was introduced that carried across all four focus groups, the influence of cohort membership in three dimensions: fit, dropouts, and new members.

Membership

Although these were all closed cohorts, each cohort was impacted by members who dropped out, and members of other cohorts who joined to make up a class. As for members dropping, this was viewed as a positive factor in the minds of those who re-mained in this particular cohort as mentioned previously, and captured by Kathy who commented "Somehow I just felt like the people who remained were the people who real-

ly wanted us to succeed." As for the impact of students from other cohorts who had to sit out of a class for health or other reasons and were joining this cohort to make up the class, the impact was generally viewed as negative. This conversation among the participants demonstrates the process of discovery that happened in this and the other focus groups:

> Linda: we had guests come, you know … we had a couple of times [in] two different courses we had that guy when we were down in the basement.

> Doug: you know it's interesting – they spent time with us – they spent at least 8 weeks with us.

> Linda: and we – I know who they are.

> Sherry: his name was JM.

> Linda – he was pleasant enough and he was smart.

> Sherry: he missed a lot of classes.

> Doug: he was an interloper … he came in; he was very much in our territory.

> Linda: he was taking our time.

> Doug: he wasn't part of the cohort. He hadn't grown the same way we had so there wasn't a connection … there wasn't a fit.

The dimension of fit was an important factor in regard to both new and existing members. It is interesting that this group seemed to deal with new members in somewhat the same fashion that they had suffered in their larger cohort. As Linda pointed out, "I'm not sure how welcoming we were. We were all polite, nice people but as far as inclusive and come on and join the fun, I don't think we did." Again the group moved toward a conclusion on this important group dynamic:

> Moderator: So what impact did that have on your eight weeks?

> Doug: None

Kathy: We just pretty much ignored him – no just kidding

All: <laughter>

Linda: That's pretty much the truth

Doug: I wonder if we loved our cohort by then so much that we protected ourselves against the interlopers by not welcoming them – because we are all welcoming people, I think we're all warm-hearted folks and like you said the guy was nice and smart and participated.

From the standpoint of the remaining cohort members, the early exit of a number of students seemed to have resolved any fit issues. In the case of this cohort, fit seemed to be more of an attitudinal issue regarding openness and tolerance among each other. Linda commented, "Well there was one person I didn't remember who it is and maybe it doesn't really even matter but who would sit there, and … he would just be sitting with his back looking away." Kathy again made the point that group size was not the impediment to productive relationships; "I'm not saying because the group was larger, but the people who were involved in the larger group, they just never moved enough to feel comfortable." It was her observation however, that once those who would not be "moved enough" left the cohort. "It came naturally later, it was [just] there. People were more freely able to say what they had to say."

Relationships and Support

The relationships that evolved and were evident during the researcher's tenure with this cohort and the focus group experience itself, demonstrated a considerable level of comfort and openness based on shared experience and what the group called "crucibles". As Doug recalled, "I think that the people who were left whatever the reason stuck it out and … I think we kind of locked arms and said we're in it for the long haul."

This resolve eventually manifested itself in a level of commitment and camaraderie that was gratifying to the group, as they each commented:

> Kathy: I feel that we have the cohort - we have a responsibility for that ... I owe it to my cohort to make sure that we're all going to succeed and I think that becomes one common bond that we have in the cohort.

> Doug: So you develop that sense of love for each other and to develop the experience that leads to that competency and assuredness of reliance you have to have a longer term relationship – an exposure that happens over and over again.

> Sherry: I want to throw in commitment because, you now, even today once I committed to you I knew I would be here but earlier – me and my mom spent half the day at the hospital with a relative – whose organs are shutting down …that's why it was 5:59 – that sense of commitment – it pushes you.

> Linda: I never was thinking about what I was giving to the cohort. I was thinking I was going to be the lowliest person there. I wound up realizing, after I had taken that first downward slide, I kept thinking that this was going to be a different kind of learning. It wasn't that I was getting long term business [knowledge] it was interpersonal, social and not social from social standing, but community.

It was a context forged early on by conflict, health challenges, and doubts about continuing with the program that led this group to an approach to learning that they had not anticipated.

> Kathy: When I was diagnosed with cancer I came back to the smaller group – that was meaningful because there were people who genuinely kept in contact with me while I was out.

> Doug: We had to challenge ourselves … and we challenged each other to figure out a way to come together again after the mass explosion.

The Learning Environment

Characteristic of adult learners, this cohort came in to the program eager to learn leadership and other skills that would have direct application to their professions. They knew that they would be with the same group of students for the duration of the program but had no real expectation about the cohort approach and how it would influence their

learning. Doug offered a powerful distinction between other classroom environments

when he pointed out in this exchange;

> Doug: What comes to my mind is this organic chemistry class that I had … and it was taught in this auditorium and there was a guy you could see he was about this big … but it was a very anonymous experience. I could slip into the class, I could exit the class, I could not show up in the class and it wouldn't make a difference to the person who sat in the seat one row ahead of me. The cohort was different. I had a responsibility to be here because if you were part of my learning, I was part of your learning.
>
> Sherry: – mmm-hmmm
>
> Linda: And your voice would be missed.
>
> Doug: well thank you – but certainly someone would have noticed – there was less anonymity [because] it became a very personal and shared experience.

Collaborative Learning and Mutual Accountability

So over time, learning and relationships, like the cohort members themselves be-

came interdependent. Kathy observed:

> Yeah it was kind of like take what you've learned, your life experience, your work experience and all of that and now we're going to share, kind of like round table sharing of information. So it was easy, it was more relaxing because it felt like that what you gained was a collaboration of everything that was your life you know your education your life and everything into this cohort – this group experience

Kathy's realization, which was confirmed by the participants, was in contrast to their ex-

pectation coming into the program. Doug recalled:

> I never expected that I would depend on somebody else for my successes. I certainly didn't think they would contribute to my own. It wasn't until I got into the cohort program and about half way through, as Linda was saying, that I began to realize that my success was dependent on my cohort members. And that is very much in sharp relief to what I thought I was getting into when I walked in here.

Students can learn collaboratively without any feeling of accountability on their

part. What was distinctive about the climate in this cohort was that the participants could

not separate collaboration from accountability because the group dynamics had caused

them to relish the perspectives of each other. The responsibility to listen and share was

that strong. Linda identified the closed cohort model as the reason for this:

> I think it's [the] cohort, I really do, because otherwise it doesn't matter if we're
> adult learners we would still be in the chemistry class with Doug as anonymous
> people and there's an interplay – just sitting here you can see how we react, talk
> regarding questions that we wouldn't if we were four strangers.

For this cohort, the sense of community and accountability was the genesis of

what they came to see as the most significant outcomes of their cohort experience. For

Linda this was very personal: "It's find your sense of self – and that sense of self would

not have occurred if it had not been the shared [and] learning among people of trust. I

mean we became our own little community circle - we were lost together."

Outcomes

    Personal growth and awareness. From the researcher's perspective as an in-

structor in the program, this sense of community was evident in this cohort during the

fifth class of the 10-class sequence. Therefore, some level of socially driven outcomes

was expected. However, the magnitude of the personal transformation throughout the

duration of the program was not predictable and could only be told in their words:

> Kathy: When we wrote the "who am I" paper we wrote that early on … it played
> an important part in my development because when I wrote the paper I really
> thought I knew who I was. I wrote about my past experiences and things like that,
> but now I know who I am, you know?
>
> Moderator: Now you're saying you know – so is that changed from …
>
> Kathy: When I wrote the paper, I put down events and … stuff. But through the
> course of these 20 months the classes and reflections and experiences and every-
> thing made me know what that stuff meant – who I really am.
>
> Doug: As opposed to what you had done?
>
> Kathy: Yes

Doug: You were able to answer the question.

Kathy: Exactly – who am I?

Moderator: So what is that does it translate to?

Linda: Confidence, security

Kathy: Who I am is untouchable!

This depth of personal transformation was fostered by a socially-constructed learning in which no program, course, or topic was complete until all had shared, questioned and challenged each other regarding their perspectives and experiences. Their outcomes included an energized sense of self as for Sherry; "it built my confidence as well. I feel that I'm ready to take on the world or more now", or as the others concluded:

Linda: I use learnings in this class in every aspect of my life - every aspect of my life!

Doug: This was transformational.

Moderator: So you almost can't separate what you learned from who you are?

Linda: Can't – won't

Doug: Can't anymore – it's too late – we've already tasted the fruit – you can't un-taste it

Focus Group 2

Focus group 2 (cohort 1) had three participants from a cohort of 19 and was the first cohort in the program having completed their degree in 2007. Travel and other scheduling issues precluded better participation; however it was the researcher's perception that this group would have a common basic outlook on the experience. This was confirmed, in part, at the end of the session:

Joyce: I'd be willing to bet that almost any of our cohort, had you pulled them in here tonight, they would have said the same things we've said in terms of that

trust and relationships because I do think we had that bonding to where I think everybody would have said that same thing about the trust and relationships. Yeah I really - how do you all feel about that?

Charlie: Absolutely I'd agree. The people in our cohort would agree to that point about the trust and the comfort in a relationship. And how important that was.

Joyce: Again they might disagree on a lot of other things but I do think there was that common feeling among everybody. I don't think there was anyone outside that circle

Terry: We all feel pretty similar about how things went.

The Cohort Experience

That trust and comfort theme carried over into the general discussion about the cohort and how it developed over time. The participants found the cohort to be an increasingly comfortable place to be and it is the researcher's impression of this group that they were a particularly mature group of professionals who embraced the cohort concept quickly, whether they had no previous experience with cohorts or had actually been in a closed cohort program.

> Charlie: I think there was a definite comfort that came around being with the same folks every week. Maybe the first class I didn't really see that and feel that, but as we grew together in the second class and the third class, the camaraderie really made it very comfortable to be in the room together and to talk about things that some people may not, just because of their behavior [MBTI, DiSC] profiles. They might not normally share that kind of thing.

> Terry: I did my undergraduate [program] in a cohort environment as well. It creates a lot of camaraderie and stronger relationships being with the same group and it raises the comfort level for you to share personal experiences that benefit the rest of the class and through that you develop stronger relationships with people because you get to know them better.

Membership

As evident in the first focus group, an antipathy toward new members or interlopers as Doug had called them, was present in this group. This opinion of others not of the cohort is understandable on one hand given the atmosphere just described by Charlie and

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Terry and the group identity that had developed. On the other hand, the group seemed to

forget or set aside their first days in the cohort before relationships and group dynamics

became so favorable.

> Joyce: We did have new people come in and that was …awful! And I think we eventually absorbed them I mean we eventually embraced them but there was a real awkwardness in bringing those people in … it took a while to embrace those people.

> Moderator: So what's that look like – what does that do?

> Terry: Just added another dimension to the classroom that - you know, we had to start the process – the relational process from scratch with that person.

> Charlie: The people that were in there from another cohort … there were some that were not interested in that relationship building because we were a group [our cohort] of folks.

> Terry: Yeah it kind of brought you back to the regular classroom setting – you know 10:00 to 10:50 you see that face and then you're out of there.

> Joyce: It changed the dynamic of the class – I don't think it changed the relation-ship among the cohort but it did change the dynamics of how we interacted with everybody. Some of them were delightful but, they didn't belong to us.
> As it turned out this cohort did lose a few original members during the program,

and for those a sense of loss was felt that was profound, even poignant.

> Joyce: About the second or third class that we took we had a couple people drop out and that really was hard. I found that very difficult when those people didn't come back it felt like part of us was pulled away. I remember specifically that I was very touched by that.

> Moderator: Did you take it personally?

> Joyce: Yes I did take it personally and not just offended but that that person was gone and was a missing piece, a missing part because we all sort of had roles that we played in the cohort.

> Terry: I understand the feeling because it was the first cohort and I wanted to see the programs succeed because I was part of it and the degree, the reputation of the degree was kind of on the line from how I felt.

Relationships and Support

A very important dynamic that surfaced in the discussion involved how the cohort

got to know each other and how to honor each other's vulnerabilities in their interactions.

This signals a considerable depth to their relationships in that they were perceptive

enough to notice and cared enough to moderate their interaction.

> Joyce: You've gotten used to each other so you're not judging – you're over that judging phase and you've sort of accepted and it's like ok that's just who they are and I know who they are and I still love them

> Moderator: Anything else about how it changed over time?

> Terry: I think – just an observation - there were times when someone would make a statement regarding the material and someone may have wanted to say something to argue that point but were reluctant because they were afraid they might have stepped on somebody's toes. We had gotten [to be] so close it may have gotten dangerously to the point where it could have possibly jaded cross-examination [discussion].

> Joyce: Yeah I think that cut both ways. I think in some cases it allowed us to be very open and honest and in some cases if we knew there were points that would – sensitive points for people – we might have avoided some of that – I hadn't thought about that but yeah, yeah.
> Charlie: That's a good point because as time went on we did uncover the sensitive points in a lot of folks as we got more comfortable with one another and we saw those insecurities.

As a result of this relationship, Charlie commented, "One of the most important

things I took away was the continuity between the classes and the people in the classes

and the consistency of the value of our discussions … we were comfortable with one

another and learned more … everybody had things to share."

The Learning Environment

This group spent considerable time discussing the classroom dynamics as it re-

lated to the professors of the program and the "ownership" of the classroom.

> Charlie: There was an opportunity for communication to each new professor about the cohort, which happened. I think there were some folks [professors] who

listened to that, took it to heart, and worked with this group as a learning mechanism. There were others who came in and either ignored it or didn't pay more attention to it … so from the learning environment perspective it was that ownership that drove the learning environment. Because it was our cohort – it was ours – I would agree with that.

Joyce: Some of our teachers did it well and some were clearly not either comfortable with it and didn't know what to do with us

Terry: Well a lot of that stems I think from the professor or teacher not dealing well with adult learners who know as much or have been in positions that are equal to or greater than what they – it may have been somewhat intimidating – possibly.

As a result, professors exercised their influence not only in the more traditional fashion in their material, professional experience, and teaching style, but mostly in their ability to acclimate to the cohort in what the cohort viewed as their classroom. As Joyce pointed out: "The professor was the outsider - it was our cohort so the professor had to come in and earn sort of the respect. You know they had to make themselves a part of the cohort to be allowed to get in and some we allowed in closer than others I think."

Collaborative Learning and Mutual Accountability

As the cohort developed relationships, the opportunities for shared learning and a sense of accountability began to develop. Consequently students looked to each other for their perspectives and determined that their ability to learn was strongly linked to their cohort as Terry commented about how learning developed: "Because of our relationship building and getting to know each other a little better and we were more willing to share some personal experiences later in the program than we would have been earlier in the program." Joyce and Charlie extended this theme:

Joyce: It was the shared – the various dimensions of ideas, you know, the variety of ideas that did bubble up – was I think very insightful and it provided a great learning experience … you get people from real different perspectives coming in – I think that that shared ideas you've got the same people who are learning and

growing together. So you see some of the changes take place in terms of their thinking and ideas.

Charlie: I still go back to that shared accountability from a learning environment. I think we all wanted to see one another succeed. We cared about one another because we knew one another. We knew – for lack of a better word – what was at stake for everybody, what was at stake, and what was to gain – we wanted to see everybody succeed and that learning environment was driven by that mutual accountability we had.

It seemed that with this group that the responsibility for showing up and participating and knowing each other and making meaning through others was a dynamic that was visible, understood, and eventually, expected as described in this way:

Charlie: Learning through other people without them really putting effort into me - learning [by] observation – seeing the strengths of people and being able to read easier in everybody – learning with my cohort, identifying their strengths and weaknesses and things that they do that I want to own, or things that people do that I hope I don't ever do.

The group offered a very suitable recap of how they saw the learning environment in their cohort.

Moderator: If I could ask then to characterize how you felt about the learning environment in your cohort.

Joyce: Comfortable, safe

Terry: Diverse

Joyce: Very diverse

Moderator: So being diverse and safe is pretty powerful?

Joyce: mmm-hmm that's not something that happens immediately. That's the kind of thing that does build in a cohort.

Outcomes

Improved job performance. The cohorts all seem to be attracted to this program by the prospects of being better managers, more efficient at their work, perhaps to the extent that it spurs promotion or other recognition. Learning that can be directly applied

is important to adult learners and for the most part they seemed confident that that objective was achieved. Charlie commented, "I learned things from other people that I could apply to my real world." Terry's outlook was very similar:

> I was able to pick up on an individual who had a lot of professional etiquette, another individual who was a really a good rational thinker – quick on their feet. I learned from those things because I didn't have that [ability] and I could pick up on it. The other thing with the program was being able to put what you learned to practical use right away.

Personal Growth and Awareness

> However, the outcome deemed most important was unanticipated:

> Joyce: Well I think I went into the program looking for a degree. I came out of the program having learned about myself and built relationships with people who I learned a lot from and care a lot about. I think I did change and that would not have happened without a cohort.

> Terry: Well, I think through the program I was doing a lot of self analysis and one thing that hit home with me is that there's always more than one solution to a problem. It teaches you it's not about being right it's about having the best team and it's about learning other perspectives to solve problems and resolve some of the questions we had.

> Charlie: anybody could have done this on line through any school - sit at a computer in a chat room and gotten the degree – that's content. But, I think what the cohort helped us with was with context. Right then and there, because knowing one another when we talked about a concept I was applying it to other people in the class.

It was significant that this group from the first cohort were more than two years out of the program and that their recollections and feelings about their experience are still so vivid and tenderly held:

> Moderator: Any other comments about the cohort experience?

> Joyce: I'm personally very thankful for having had that experience

> Terry: yeah

> Charlie: I would not have wanted it any other way then the group that we had and what we experienced and what we learned it was very valuable. From a cohort perspective I wouldn't have wanted it any other way!

Focus Group 3

Focus group 3 (cohort 6) was composed of six members of the sixteen students in the last and only active cohort in the program. They will finish the program in the summer of 2010. This cohort, like cohort 5 experienced a crisis that tested their resolve regarding finishing the program. Coincidental to the completion of the third course of the sequence of ten, the administration announced the termination of their degree program at the end of their course of study in 2010. There ensued an intense period of questioning and reassessing the value of continuing in the program. Anita summarized this trying time:

> A lot of that had to do with the strength or the confidence that we felt the school had in the program was no longer there. We got it so if you don't see any value in … then how can we feel good about being in this program … that you're saying, ok after you guys we're not doing this anymore. It kind of popped a hole in our balloon … But we hung in there as a cohort and some weak people fell off and not weak - meaning not weak but those people who necessarily thought they could get something better somewhere else. We kind of got a second wind and decided it was more commitment to finish together at that point and decided to come together and let's do it and so we moved along.

The Cohort Experience

With that defining event behind them, the cohort settled into the program and began to establish the relationships that define their remaining time together as this exchange demonstrates:

> Toni: For me it was very positive. I didn't know what to expect because I didn't really know about the cohort idea 'til I came to graduate school. It's like we became a family - at least that's how I feel. And that we help each other out. And we watch after each other and make sure that assignments get around if somebody is not in class.
>
> Rosalind: It's tough coming back into an academic setting after being out of it for a while having a full time job coming here for one night a week – it really helped acclimate myself back into the school setting and having people I know and care

for and develop friendships with and I could trust to bounce ideas off. It was new to me coming back and getting in that groove again. It was really helpful for me.

Anita: Ok for me I enjoyed it – I enjoyed the cohort experience because while it was closed it also gives you a sense of control in that you know your family you know who's going to be there.

Interestingly there were events that demonstrated the development of the atmos-

phere described by these students.

Toni: I don't know if you remember but … the first day we walked into Dr. SC's class and the tables were like this. You weren't facing one another. One of the first things she [cohort member] said was, we can't see each other and I looked at her and said, we're bonding. For that to be the first thing and remember we had to move those tables so we could see each other. I thought something is changing here.

Membership

To some extent, this group described a somewhat different approach to shifting

membership, especially in regard to the inclusion of students from other cohorts.

Harold: I think as a cohort when somebody would come in for just one class, I think we pretty much absorbed them, got to know them, and made them feel comfortable. We all realized we had something to learn from this person and we'll make this class with us memorable.

However, their attitude toward certain members of their cohort was less inclusive

as individual motives and perspectives became apparent as they discussed two particular

instances of people acting in fashion outside of the bonded, cohesive group portrayed ear-

lier. The first instance followed a skit in class that used racial remarks to make a point

and spur discussion. This dialogue describes the fall-out from that encounter.

Harold: And so we performed this skit where I was to use a racial slur just to get things stirred up and get people going. But I will tell you that I had two people in our cohort come up to me and said "I knew you were that way" and "I know your heart is that way and I will never forgive you" and to this day they still see me as some lying white racist.
Yvette: Had Harold been a weak minded person then that would have caused him to drop out … when we did that, I defended the fact that it was an … But then I

became outcast from those same two people with him because of the fact of my color that I didn't immediately say yes, he is a racist.

As with some of the other crucible events described by this and other focus groups, the cohort environment provides an appreciable degree of support that defines how students can move forward.

> Harold: It does speak to the strength of our cohort – I grew enough that, you know, I'm going to love them despite that and I'm going to love them despite my-self and we're going to continue with this class. I'm going to continue to be bold with my opinions and to be bold in listening to theirs and understanding their situation and the eco- socio whatever environment they come from so I think the strength of the cohort has ruled and won out even in that one traumatic event in my life.

The second instance of note based on the participant's recalled experience centered on a recalcitrant cohort member who became a disruptive influence in class and during group projects. The participants mention trace periods of grace that preceded a general exclusion of this member, who eventually left the program.

> Anita: The one thing I am most disappointed in our cohort is that PJ was a boot in a room full of shoes …she never found her niche with anyone. She was in our cohort but nobody could identify with her. If we would have come together and at least attempted to let her know we were in there with her then she may still be with the cohort.

> Yvette: Even in the first class she sat by herself and I think there were a couple classes where Anita would sit in the middle with her, but PJ established herself as different.

> Anita: But as a group we formed a group opinion … even if she had the desire to penetrate it, we fortified the wall.

> Brenda: I would disagree with that. The reason is – I think we started to do that but if you remember the class where CL kind of chewed everybody out and said you need to give this lady a chance and ask her to come back to class. I was on her committee to do outside work three times and I can tell you unequivocally – she did nothing.

Relationships and Support

That willingness to reach out was described very poignantly by Anita as she re-

called an intervention by Brenda in the midst of the turmoil surrounding the announce-

ment of the termination of the program. This event took place after the third course.

> Anita: by the time we got to his class he was disorganized, I mean we were just all
> over the place. That's when I decided, I'm changing. And I had actually changed,
> but the positive thing about the cohort was Brenda because she called me and said
> "don't do it". "Please don't do it, we're a family. We love you, don't do it". And
> then Harold got a hold of me –he let me know you have established yourself in
> this cohort. You are a part of us now and we really can't function with that miss-
> ing piece. And it took them coming together to say you're important enough to
> this cohort, don't do it.

So for the majority of the cohort who were able to set aside personal agendas,

those who chose to operate within the network of relationships and support that had de-

veloped, and atmosphere was created that allowed them to begin to interact with each

other in a more collegial fashion.

> Harold: And I got to know everybody well enough that even though they would
> throw chairs and holler and boo and hoo at the end of the lecture you know that
> was just it …and I've voiced it respectful of someone else's race, religion, culture,
> … and I felt comfortable with everybody.

> Toni: I've enjoyed being able to speak out

> Rosalind: From an introvert's point of view it's been rather fun for me because I
> was comfortable.

This is the environment that shaped their time together as students and was the

basis for their learning experience.

The Learning Environment

So the cohort brought this myriad of factors, relationships, and experiences to

bear as the participants described learning in a closed cohort.

> Harold: It was more of a shared experience. The learning process was more clas-
> sical because we were forced to think ... and we had to learn what questions to ask

and to ask the right questions. And then we learned from others. So we're thinking we're asking questions we're getting other people opinions, I thought it was a far more thorough education, learning experience.
Anita: I think the word learning cheats what happened, I think it's growth. We were growing – new ideas were introduced they were not forced upon us … and then we took that information and what we could use we incorporated into our personal lives and into our professional lives and into our family lives. It was a growing experience that for a lot of years where you have talents but I never connected the dots …that's not learning that's growing.

Toni: It's not something you learn, that's something that becomes a part of you.

Rosalind: It's fascinating to watch people learn and grow because we have the opportunity to be with them in a cohort over a year. We've all grown in different ways but it's fascinating to watch.

Collaborative Learning and Mutual Accountability

Because of the nature of the closed cohort, certain learning dynamics exist that are not found elsewhere. Again it's how the individual cohort members respond to this that determines the overall learning climate as Harold points out.

Harold: And instead of the traditional learning environment where we would have gotten out of that lecture and never seen those people again at least I have been forced to continue to work with them and unfortunately maybe they have been forced to continue to listen to me. But as a group we have stuck together and gone forward.

As the dynamic Harold describes plays out, the cohort members begin to find their place in the group discussion and sharing. In this exchange, Yvette tells how she used her fellow students to frame up the material and the interaction.

Yvette: It's funny how you'd see how our class - the same people would always start the discussion. If you throw out a question Toni, Anita, or Harold are going to be the first ones to answer and their opinions might not be the same - and you can sit back for minute and think, you can always count on Rosalind or Brenda to see something that nobody else thought of.

Toni: And then they're going to interject it

Yvette: That's how our learning environment usually goes so I always count on those three to make sure I didn't misunderstand what was going on – because I have a tendency to misunderstand the question.

Brenda: I think the way you're going to grow is when you do look at a different opinion. It's something from a different viewpoint.

Outcomes

Personal outcomes were the same as the other focus groups, personal growth and job enhancement. In regard to the latter, Anita described a very meaningful demonstration of both.

> Anita: But the biggest thing I got that I did not anticipate was an awakening in that my management style has always been me looking out. Not what they were seeing in me. I had an issue at work. So I called a staff meeting … And I said put your pads and pencils down – let's just talk. Nobody would say anything so I started it off. But only because through the program I had realized that I had to give a little bit of me. As I started talking I could see the faces kind of softening up and then I got into what the issue was.   My reward was after the meeting I went back to my office and the staff rallied because of what they found out.

Likewise, Rosalind was able to apply what she learned from the material and her cohort directly to her job situation.

> Rosalind: I started this course when I was new at a job. I think one of the things I was so shocked with was, it's been a very turbulent couple of years as you all know in my role, [we were] definitely lacking any kind of leadership and management in the department I'm in. I was just amazed - I would say I was blessed, because we could cover a topic, and I could turn around and actually help make a difference with somebody else I worked with, or help me be able to just cope and function and try to find my way through this maze of chaos.

Yvette shared a very transformational experience that had an immediate impact on her and future implications from a professional standpoint.

> Yvette : I've got a perspective before I came into this program – I didn't know that I didn't know myself until I came in here. Now that I know the kind of person that I am and the way that I operate in a business capacity I have a greater appreciation for differences of opinion from others which enables me to see different venues of compromise and being able to work with different types of people.

> Moderator: So what do you know about Yvette that you didn't know?

Yvette: What do I know that I did not know? I did not know – if you told me that I would be applying to law school when I started – I never would have thought that. Because speaking up for other people – that would have been the last thing – the furthest thing from my mind. And now it's the first and only thing I can see. To be able to help people past their own agendas to get to the truth and to the bottom of things so the greater good can benefit from it. So for me this has been a whole awakening

Perhaps Harold captured the group experience regarding the program and what they will take with them.

Harold: I started this course of study because I wasn't satisfied with where I was and I wanted a change – I didn't know what that change was going to be. But I knew I wanted to go back to school and study and broaden myself in hopes that something better would come along and it did. Because of the cohort method I think all of us would agree that we're leaving with friendships we wouldn't have had otherwise and I think that's a great benefit of a cohort.

Focus Group 4

Focus group 4 (cohort 4) provided the six participants for the final focus group from a cohort of eighteen students. Their cohort experiences were very similar to the others; however a greater portion of the interview centered on membership and professor efficacy as mentioned early by Mike:

Mike: In a closed cohort model, it's pragmatic, it's very practical from an adult learner perspective. The comfort level we sort of had with one another, it was very helpful in the learning process because we had other stuff to deal with: family and work and stuff. Within that model you have to make sure that you are accepting the right people into the group because if you don't, if you have lackadaisical admission standards, you are wasting time in that cohort with subjects or discussions that are beneath what you should be discussing for a graduate level course.

The Cohort Experience

More similar to comments from other groups, Kelly formed her opinion about the cohort format from the standpoint of someone who had been out of school for a while and who had a rather detached experience.

65

Kelly: I did both of my bachelors with eleven years of that and I never once had the same person in the same class with me. I went to UofM and it's like one out of a hundred people in a class. It was new experience to have just a small – we were one of the larger cohorts twenty-two started out. I loved the experience of having the same people each time. I enjoyed that closed cohort because it gave me a sense of security, I knew who I was going to talk to and who is was going to see from week to week to week. And if I had a question I knew who I could go to and ask "how did you feel about that", "what did you get out of this".

Roberta was quick to tie the cohort format to the learning process.

Roberta: I would agree that there is a very strong relational aspect to a closed co-hort. I'm not sure if that depends on the dynamics of the individuals that are in that cohort and if every closed cohort experience has that relational aspect. At least for my experience this definitely had a relational aspect that actually has some value in the learning process for me.

Christine's outlook was somewhat mixed as she voiced a perspective that put less value on the relational aspects of the cohort.

Christine: I didn't like it as much for my experience from a social aspect. I went to a very small high school and a very large undergrad and then back to a small grad school. And not that we didn't learn about new things and learn different perspectives based on that subject matter but I pretty much could predict what someone was going to say regarding that so I missed that diversity. It did have its advantages. There's a close aspect of having a better friend. In undergrad I couldn't tell you one person I talk to.

Moderator: So if I am hearing you right, there was a relational aspect of the cohort that was OK?

Christine: Correct.

Membership

Mike jumped in early in the interview to begin the discussion regarding member-ship – his first comments pointing to admission standards and the importance of bringing students to the cohort who are similarly equipped from an education and experience standpoint. Arnold offered his take on those who may be qualified, but not participating at an appropriate level. His comments spurred a give and take with others in the group.

Arnold: I think it's all about what you bring to the table and what you expect out of it. If you're just here to get another degree in the path of learning then you're not all in. In the closed cohort model, for everyone to gain maximum value, everyone needs to bring something to the table and be alert and be active and be actively engaged. If their agenda is to be a part of the community of learning and bring something out of it and to mature and develop themselves then everybody benefits. But if it's just a come in, warm a seat and work through the process, then they don't benefit and we also lose something in the cohort.

Barbara: We figured out who was going to bring something to the table and who we could all learn from and who kind of sat there and was doing enough work to get the "paper". After a while I kind of started to just write those people off and not pay attention to them and they kind of became part of the scenery to me just like the walls and the chairs where I didn't even think of them as classmates.

Christine: It can stop you from – even if they bring a good idea like you don't even hear it because you're so used to that – which is sad.

Mike: The point of the closed cohort model is that the cohort teaches and creates a relationship with itself and we play off one another, I think that's the point of it. So it's all about the community of learners.

The group moved toward some conclusions regarding membership in this ex-

change about various membership issues.

Moderator: Let me ask a few more question about membership. Which is the most disruptive? Somebody who checks in for eight weeks or someone who is in your cohort who really wasn't qualified, or someone who comes in every week and is not dressed to play.

Barbara: Well what's the difference between the second and third?

Moderator: You could be not qualified, but doing the work

Mike: Just a gut reaction what you're talking about pisses me off.

Arnold: From my cohort experiences, the third person's the worst – the third person has the potential but is sitting on their hands and that drains the cohort model.

Barbara: I would have to say that I can't tell the difference between the second one and the third one in a real life setting because if someone comes and they're not dressed to play, then I assume they're not qualified to be in the cohort.

Whereas most of these comment were directed toward regular cohort members, Kelly concluded the discussion by recalling two students from other cohorts who joined cohort 4 for a course.

> Kelly: We had two guys that I can remember and they were completely different – they brought different things to the table – one brought nothing and one felt like he was part of the cohort. He was plugged in and he had things to share. We learned from him.

From the discussions in this and the other focus groups it appears that a core group of qualified, motivated learners coalesces for the purpose of sharing experiences and ideas in their quest for learning that will have demonstrable value for them.

Relationships and Support

The group spoke often about the growth of relationships over time and how they grew to know they could depend on each other. Some were very appreciative of the closeness and support they enjoyed.

> Kelly: I enjoyed that closed cohort because it gave me a sense of security. I knew who I was going to talk to and who I was going to see from week to week to week. And if I had a question I knew who I could go to and ask "how did you feel about that", "what did you get out of this".

> Roberta: We had a colleague in the cohort who did probably a better job than most of us really capitalizing on the educational value of the relational element offered. Lots of times you'd talk to him and three days later he'd go "you know I was thinking about something you said". He got the majority of his academic experience in this cohort from the relational aspect. Not just him alone but he's an example. I would argue that the relational aspect had its own educational value.

For others it was developing at least a working relationship that let them share the load of projects and other learning activities.

> Mike: I have always been the person in groups that did it. When you did group projects, I always hated them because there's always the one person who ended up doing it all and that was always me. But this was the first time, maybe because of what we were learning, that I could actually let go of what I expected to be the outcome and you have to trust that it's going to be ok even if it may not be as good as what you expected. But allowing people to go ahead and do what they

could do even if it was a little bit late or even if it was a little bit shorter or whatever really was a very liberating experience for me.

The Learning Environment

An important aspect of the learning environment for this cohort was the quality of instruction from the professors. Fundamental to their outlook was the concept of ownership in the classroom.

> Moderator: Let me ask you a few questions – if you think about your classroom – who owned that?
>
> Kelly: I think the students did – the teachers came in an out but we were the classroom.
>
> Barbara: It depended on the teacher – who owned it. Sometimes we had teachers who would facilitate discussion among us that we could share our experiences among each other as leaders. And then we had some teachers who would come in and it was like they would not facilitate but just talk and when we would try to add how we felt or add something to that it was like they were waiting for a second to shut us up so they could continue. So it depended on the teacher who owned the room. So I guess the teacher owns the room because they decide to let us own it or not.
>
> Arnold: I think in the cohort model it's co-owned. It's a dynamic exchange; it depends on the members and how you managed that.
>
> Mike: We were very much engaged and that was us and I don't think that had anything to do with the instructor. That was our personality. We would try, even though some teachers resisted, to do what we do. And sometimes the folks who couldn't really control us they just had to go with the flow.

Closely related was the effectiveness of the professors, especially in terms of their ability to communicate real world experience and facilitate the sharing of experiences by the students.

> Mike: I think the faculty needs more experience than the majority of your cohort members I'll just say that. There were a few it was like [I thought] why aren't we teaching this guy this course? And so in order to create an appropriate learning environment you have to have faculty that are well rehearsed in cohort teaching.

Kelly: There were some classes I thought why are we taking this? Because it was like the teachers would want to go back – it would be nice if they knew what the content of the previous class had been.

Roberta: I think the course [of study] overall felt very fragmented so each course felt isolated from the others. And that is a result of what Mike said about the faculty that is teaching all these programs instead of working through these things together, also a result of the order of those courses.

Collaborative Learning and Mutual Accountability

For this group, the cohort was supposed to be a meeting of many minds, a forum for discussion and as such depended on students shouldering the responsibility for group learning.

Mike: It's an attitudinal thing – so if you came with negative energy every single time and talk about how awful your life was and your work was - I learned nothing from that. That kind of contribution is a net negative. From a personal perspective, when we brought experiences to the table, the only ones that were relevant at least to me personally were the ones that provided an example of a positive experience or that brought a result some almost advice type piece. When the cohort acted like leaders, we learned, when we acted like followers we learned nothing.

Arnold: If you frame it up whether you are in a work environment or a closed cohort environment which becomes like a work environment, then I think we focus on the other beneficial aspects in terms of the hopefully rigorous academic learning, the transfer of knowledge, the relationships you hopefully will build when you become better acquainted.

Roberta: From my perspective, but I'd throw it out there for everybody to provide their opinion but I would argue that the relational aspect of this is not just an add-on, "nice to have" experience. I would argue that the relational element had in, and of itself, its own educational value. That's why I'm saying that those people become a resource but even before you get to the place where you've moved on and back in your work environment full time.

Outcomes

There was a fascinating exchange regarding what three of the students gained from the cohort experience and how it manifested itself in their lives, especially their professions. For Roberta and Kelly, the experience of meaningful self reflection and new

leadership concepts led them to understand and appreciate that their jobs were exactly the right place for them – their new understanding affirmed them in those roles. For Barbara, this same self-knowledge also helped crystallize what she wanted in her job and how her position met that vision. In her case, she left the company. Christine was the hybrid of the group in that her experience confirmed that she was in an environment that was not congruous with her personal vision, but she felt empowered to deal with it and make her work experience what she wanted it to be and not what might be forced upon her.

> Christine: I can only – so cheesy, like BP and I had lunch not long ago and I'm like "your program changed my life" – it really, really did. If it had not been for this program I would have been in the same rut at my job and I have not switched jobs. I'm in the same company, if anything the company's worse. But I love it every day more and it's because of this program. It's because of what I've gained.

> Barbara: A completely opposite thing happened to me – I started to hate my job more and more every day until I finally had the opportunity to quit.

> Mike: But it might be the same reason though that you became - because of how you evaluate what you were doing …

> Barbara: And I remember having a deep conversation with Roberta about it. I don't know if you remember it but you said something - everything I thought about [my company] which was, I said "I feel like everything I'm learning is making me feel like I'm in the wrong place". And you said, "I feel exactly the opposite, it's all been a big validation for me that I'm in the right place". I just thought "why don't I have that?"

> Kelly: What Roberta said about it just solidified where she was and what she was doing – it opened my eyes to what I was doing – it kind of gave me another pers-pective in some of the areas. We just had that in class and so it was really cool that it was simultaneously working it through when we had these differences of opinions and stuff. All the tests and everything that I learned about myself during this self reflection part of the class just said who you are and what you're doing is exactly where you need to be. It made me feel comfortable where I am what I'm doing but gave me fuel to move more forward.

The dual themes of personal growth and understanding together with practical ap-proaches for the work environments became a standard outcome as reported by this and other focus groups. It seems that for those who could embrace the cohort model and en-

gage in the community of sharing and learning, the rewards were substantial, even trans-

formative. For Arnold, who had a very meaningful, previous closed cohort experience,

this cohort provided a great return.

> Arnold: My first cohort experience expanded my thinking greatly in terms of how organizations make decisions at the highest levels. The outcome here – I entered trying to get more mechanics but I came out of it with more – it became less mechanics and more personal in terms especially of the reflective portion that everyone talked about here. It gave me an opportunity to reflect more inwardly in terms of what all this means as it relates to where I'm at and where I hope to be. How do I fit within these models, how have I managed … or not. It was definitely more reflective opportunity where the world slowed down and I got enough time to go through the things that used to be mechanical and personalize it more. It was very good.

Expressive Behaviors

As part of the research methodology, an assistant moderator was utilized to observe and capture the interaction among the participants. Also known as non-verbal behavior, facial expression, tone of voice, and body movements, expressive behaviors can be valid indicators of what an individual thinks about a situation or another person. Because the phenomenon of the closed cohort has such a strong relational component, it seemed wise to perform a cross-check to confirm that the dialogue and the expressive behaviors were congruent. In other words, did the non-verbal activities support their claims regarding strong, positive relationships?

In a word the answer to this inquiry was – yes. For the duration of all four of the focus groups, behavior was positive and affirming, even when they challenged each other's recollections of opinions. Touching, head nodding, uh huh's, eye contact, respectful listening were the norm for these sessions. The co-moderator remarked after each session about the camaraderie among the participants and the absence of negative expressive behaviors.

Facial expressions suggested engagement and listening with frequent smiling as the groups interacted. Tone of voice was generally calm, conversational volume and inflection. All groups were prone to laughter several times during each session, sometimes bordering on raucous as they recalled humorous incidents from class. Body movements mostly involved considerable head nodding from certain participants more than the others or unanimously as certain points were made. One participant was noticeable in that she tended to lean back from the table for much of the session, but was actively engaged in the discussion so this was interpreted as a normal posture.

In terms of the descriptors of expressive behaviors developed for the assistant moderator, the participants demonstrated approval, support, engagement in the form of respectful listening, and understanding. Given this outcome, the researcher is confident that the data collection was robust, accurate, and free of personal agendas. These were gatherings of friends shaped by shared experience who came together to share the value of their closed cohort experiences and outcomes.

Conclusion

As expected, from the researcher's knowledge of the cohorts as an instructor, each focus group reflected a little different personality. However, the fact that they would spend an evening away from their families and other interests to attend a two-hour interview about their experiences in a closed cohort suggests their passion for the experience and each other. Every participant shared extensively in these sessions and the interview was not unlike their interaction in class – spontaneous, honest, and at times independent of the moderator. They reminded, questioned, empathized and demonstrated a respect for

each other and their perspective. This is exactly what they revealed in their responses as the reason for and power of their cohort experience.

Because of the common themes and the fact that many, if not all, were repeated in each successive interview, this researcher is confident that the sample used provided adequate coverage of this closed cohort phenomenon. Of concern is the issue of those who chose not to come forward to participate. Also from the data reported, there are cohort members who did not participate in the community of learning in the same fashion as those interviewed. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The Closed Cohort Phenomenon

The closed cohort format offers some important advantages for the adult learner and the institution. Because the group progresses through a designated sequence of courses, it is relatively easy to forecast faculty needs as well as room assignments or other administrative factors (Stinson, 2004). For the students in the closed cohort program studied, most in their 30s and 40s, the idea of having a set group of students had positive implications for students returning to school after a number of years, given the social and academic support common to the cohort model (McCarthy et al., 2005). For clarity, in this chapter participants are identified by their cohort, for example Joyce (1) indicates that Joyce is from cohort 1, not focus group 1.

> Joyce (1): You know making the decision to come back to graduate school after having been out of school for a long time was not easy. I knew I was coming into a cohort, but that didn't really affect me in one way or another in terms of my decision to go through that program but I do think it was something that made the whole experience richer for me in a lot of ways. There was comfort.

> Rosalind (6): It's tough coming back into an academic setting after being out of it for a while. Having a full time job coming here for one night a week – it really helped acclimate myself back into the school setting and having people I know and care for and develop friendships with and I could trust to bounce ideas off. It was new to me coming back and getting in that groove again. It was really helpful for me.

> Kelly (4): I'm going to start. I did both of my bachelors with eleven years of that and I never once had the same person in the same class with me. I went to UofM and it was like one out of a hundred people in a class. It was a new experience to have just a small group. I enjoyed that closed cohort because it gave me a sense of security; I knew who I was going to talk to and who I was going to see from week to week to week.

The Closed Cohort and Trust

Research question 1: How does a closed cohort environment influence the

development of trust?

The most fundamental of the research questions dealt with the development of

trust in the closed cohort environment. As the focus groups shared their experiences, two

general types of trust emerged. The first was more pragmatic or operational in nature. It

dealt with the level of assurance students had in each other regarding their contributions

and timeliness during group projects. This trust was actually more accurately described as

confidence in the competency and commitment of fellow students (Handy, 1995) and was

primarily task oriented. Such trust is different than the emotional trust that is mostly rela-

tionship oriented and will be discussed later. As several students observed:

> Doug (4): I think there's a difference – there are flavors of trust – there is trust in
> the sense that you are dependable. I can trust that Linda is going to get that thing
> done even if it's only two days before hand … that takes experience that also im-
> plies time. Without the time you don't get the experience.

> Mike (5): But this was the first time, maybe because of what we were learning,
> that I could actually let go of what I expected to be the outcome and you have to
> trust that it's going to be ok even if it may not be as good as what you expected.
> But allowing people to go ahead and do what they could do even if it was a little
> bit late or even if it was a little bit shorter or whatever really was a very liberating
> experience for me. It was the first moment where I could even begin to trust
> people that it was going to get done. That it was going to be OK.

The second type of trust mentioned by the focus groups was deeper, more emo-

tional and relationship oriented. This trust influenced the in-class interaction and set the

tone for collaborative learning (Holton, 2001). Such emotional engagement fostered the

trusting climate that encouraged students in these focus groups to share ideas and feelings

in pursuit of making meaning from their coursework and each other (Mishra &

Morrissey, 1990). As this relationship-driven trust developed, cohort members ex-

changed perspectives, and the social aspect of making meaning became apparent

(Birchall & Giambona, 2007; Stein & Imel, 2002). Because trust is strengthened by fac-

tors like collective identity, physical proximity, and common goals (Holton, 2001), the

level of trust was significant for many in the cohorts.

> Harold (6): I trust everyone in this room for what they would say to me. They wouldn't be clouded based on [whether] they like me [or] they dislike me [because] I'm white [or] I'm black [or] I'm this religion [or] I'm [from] this social set. They would tell me what they wanted me to know based on whether it was their opinion or they thought it would help me.

> Doug (5): That emotional trust takes time to develop and that relationship builds, so without a cohort in a conventional style classroom we might not have enjoyed that trust – that emotional trust. That risk-taking trust has to be there to cement that relationship and do even more.

Certainly, this level of trust was not reached or even desired by every student

(McCarthy et al., 2005), and a discussion of unintended consequences will follow later in

this chapter. For all 19 participants in the four focus groups, their experiences led to con-

clusions regarding trust in the closed cohort environment. Both levels of trust, pragmatic

and emotional, were not only present but positively influenced the learning environment

(Akridge et al., 2007). Trust developed and deepened over time (Maher, 2005). The re-

lationships built on trust extended beyond the classroom and the completion of the pro-

gram, even two years hence. All believe that the degree of trust they enjoyed was a direct

result of the closed cohort (Mello, 2003).

> Yvette (6): Trust – I was just about to bring that point up because even in doing this [focus group] it demonstrates that between all of us, the amount of trust we have in each other to be honest and to go ahead and speak our minds and put everything out there.

> Joyce (1): I thought about that earlier when we were talking about the safe situation because what I was trying to say was that it's safe because you … yeah it's foundational for a cohort to be high performing.

The conclusion regarding the closed cohort and trust is that given the relative stability of membership and the extended duration of the relationships, this environment positively affects the trust-outcome correlation (Lewis & Weigert, 1985).

The Closed Cohort and Communication

Research Question 2: How does a closed cohort influence the quantity and quality of communication?

As the "different flavors" of trust that Doug identified developed over time, these students describe what appears to be a reciprocal effect on or with the level of communication that occurs in the closed cohort environment (Brunard & Kleiner, 1994). Because trust is the antecedent of other behavioral characteristics, a lack of trust will have a direct, negative effect on communication (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). This exchange from cohort #1 describes the ebb and flow of trust and communication (Mishra & Morrissey, 1990), in this case due to changes in membership.

> Terry (1): There was trust and I think that's what made us feel safe. Because we developed trust we were able to open up enough two-way communication back and forth [and] we got to learn. The way you build trust is you learn about each other and you get to the point where you can get things off your chest – that's trust. I could say things to people and get feedback right away so I think it was more an opening [of] two-way communication that fosters trust.

> Charlie (1): That's the base. Trust is at the base of that relationship.

> Joyce (1): And I think that's why it was hard when people came into the cohort because you've got this cohort that's got this foundation of trust that's built up and then you get somebody else who comes in.

> Terry (1): You have to earn it – ok, can we trust this person? Can we say what we want to say to this group with this new individual in? I think that people coming in and out of the cohort does affect trust. The level of trust.

For some, a level of vulnerability or transparency that was unforeseen earlier in the cohort was an outcome that also demonstrated a level of reciprocity (Potts & Schultz, 2008). As some people trusted enough to share, others did, too.

> Anita (6): You became vulnerable at some point in this place. You had to put you out there for everybody to see, so when you soften, the thing about it is if you let [yourself] out - they come in, too. I think everybody has benefited from that. Everybody has shared something that they thought they would never share.

> Yvette (6): "It speaks volumes about the amount of trust we have for the people in this room even though we may not talk to them all the time in class or sit by them or even sometimes we may disagree with them in class. But the amount of trust we have between each other to be able to be comfortable enough to speak honestly is just amazing."

> Kathy (5): Yeah, it was kind of like take what you've learned, your life experience, your work experience and all of that and now we're going to share, kind of like round table sharing of information. So it was easy, it was more relaxing because it felt like that what you gained was a collaboration of everything that was your life,… your education, your life, and everything [goes] into this cohort – this group experience.

> Linda (5): But I don't think there's going to be the bond, the respect – I mean look at how as this conversation goes on how we listen to one another and how we wait.   There's a respect among us.

Participants have suggested a strong relationship between the gradual development of trust and an increasing willingness to engage in discussion that features not just relevant professional experience, but also personal trials, doubts, and vulnerabilities (McEvily, et al., 2003). Brenda (6) pointed out the time component of this phenomenon: "We've been together for almost two years and we just had this story last time that was amazing – from a person who is very, very quiet and seldom said anything. So [some] people are just not ready [to share] yet." The apparent result is a trust-communication cycle that might resemble an upward spiral of relationship building that creates a unique learning environment that maximized the adult learning experience (Dirks & Ferrin,

2001). As Terry (1) commented: "A cohort is better than a classroom, it's better, it's at the top of the chain in terms of learning … because of the relational part."

These, and other, experiences of the participants suggest that cohesiveness in the cohort resulted in stronger, more inclusive communication that facilitated greater group and individual outcomes (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). They credited the closed cohort learning model as the reason for such levels of communication (Mealman & Lawrence, 2000).

The Closed Cohort and Collaboration

Research Question 3: How does a closed cohort influence the ability to work collaboratively?

The initial focus for this study regarding collaboration was the more obvious outcome of students working more effectively together on projects or other team assignments. This relates to the type of trust earlier identified as confidence in another's competence and commitment to the quality and timeliness of the work (Handy, 1995) and was mentioned by all four focus groups as present in their cohorts. There was no support for the notion that the outcomes of collaboration on team projects were superior to other learning environments in terms of quality. However, participants did comment on the efficiency of their collaboration as the passing of time gave them a comfort level with each other's work style. This seems to have been facilitated by the development of emotional intelligence as students became better at managing relationships through self-awareness, the ability to manage emotions, and understanding others and their emotions (Goleman, et al., 2002). Emotional intelligence has been shown to support a collaborative learning environment (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008).

Linda (5): One of the weaknesses is also the strength – we know each other – Doug knows I'm going to wait until two days before if it's a group project before it's done but it's going to be done and it's going to be done well.

Doug (5): In other words, Linda waits until the eleventh hour.

Linda (5): Those are things that if you're not part of a cohort, you don't know about – it's like being in a close team environment - be it corporate, social or whatever. You know the strengths and weaknesses and how to work within the parameters of your group-mates and that was something I learned.

The more important aspect of collaboration significantly impacted by the closed cohort environment was collaborative learning, exclusive of assignments requiring formal collaboration (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). Collaborative learning characterized by a desire or more accurately an expectation that students would learn from each other, occurred whenever they were together and making meaning from each other's perspectives (Kegan, 1994).

Harold (6): And then we learned from others. We got other opinions not just the lecturer's opinion or my opinion - we got everyone else's opinion, so we're thinking we're asking questions, [and] we're getting other people's opinions. I thought it was a far more thorough education, learning experience.

Perhaps most striking was a sense of accountability to each other for the quality of the learning experience. Being present, prepared and engaged became more like obligations than requirements.

Charlie (1): One of the other things that really just hit me was the accountability behind it because I felt like at times … I've got to get my work done … and as a group I don't think anyone wanted to let anybody else down. So it was much more about the class and the cohort than just the grade alone – I think there was a lot of accountability there that we wanted to see each other succeed.

Kathy (5): That's exactly it – I feel just like that we have the cohort - we have a responsibility for that fulfilling we have - I owe it to my cohort to make sure that

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we're all going to succeed and I think that becomes one common bond that we have in the cohort.

Only after cohort members developed a level of emotional trust and open communication did the accountability develop that prompted them to actively engage each other and strive to share their experiences and perspectives as a necessary, even compulsory, part of the educational process (Brooks, 1998). They were obligated to listen and share and if someone was missing, a voice went unheard, the learning incomplete.

> Doug (5): The point is, I showed up for my benefit – if I didn't show up I was the only one who was harmed by that, The professor didn't care – he didn't even know if I was there. That was a different thing here – everybody knew when or if I was here and I had an accountability to the cohort members to facilitate their learning and not just mine.

Unintended Consequences

As mentioned in chapter two, there are outcomes of the closed cohort that are both unintended and counterproductive to learning. In the extreme, severe personality clashes and personal agendas can erupt into an openly hostile environment (Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001). This occurred in cohort 5 and resulted in the loss of a number of students. It was the opinion of the remaining students that those who left the program were the disruptive element of the class.

> Doug (5): The purpose of the class was to express viewpoints on a particular topic … and when I expressed my viewpoint, I was instructed to go straight to hell. I really struggled with the decision to exit the cohort.

> Linda (5): The large cohort, from my perspective, was filled with the wrong people. [They] were stuffed in to make this class …big enough … and there were people that were accepted that had no more business than the 'man in the moon' being in there. Yes, it was great being rid of them.

> Kathy (5): Somehow I just felt like the people who remained were the people who really wanted us to succeed. Genuinely, they were the people who were our cohort. We were the ones who were supposed to be here and those other people were not supposed to be there anyway.

With the downsizing of the group, the atmosphere stabilized and allowed the remnant to move forward. The outcome for those who persevered was a group determined to make the most of the program and each other. For Linda the payoff was very satisfying.

> Linda (5) – the day I walked in I thought 'what am I doing with these people', I thought I was getting more and I was going leave with more? The day I walked out, I thought I left with a lot. <voice breaking>

> Moderator: And so - what changed over that time?

> Linda: Me, and knowing the people and learning to respect the people.

An issue regarding performance rather than personalities came up in all four groups. Students who were not engaged in the relationship building necessary for a strong learning community of adults, rarely participated in group discussions and performed at the minimum level to complete the program (McCarthy, et al., 2005). This drew a mixed reaction from the focus group participants.

> Barbara (4): I think part of the cohort experience is that we figured that out pretty quick, I made up my own mind about different people in the group. After a while, I kind of started to just write those people off and not pay attention to them and they kind of became part of the scenery to me … where I didn't even think of them as classmates.

None of the participants offered any solutions to this feature of their cohorts, but instead seemed content to press on with those committed to the cohort model of dialogue and mutual learning. Possible remedies are discussed later in implications for practice.

The final issue had to do with a tendency to modify the tenor of in-class discussions due to the positive relationships that had developed. As much as the majority of each cohort felt comfortable in sharing with and challenging each other, a sensitivity developed that caused students to be, at times, silent lest they offend one of their cohort

members. Such behavior resembles the awareness of others that develops with emotional intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). As Anita observed:

> Anita (6): Because sometimes you really don't necessarily agree. But because you know that this is a family and because you know you're going to be around another however long, you reserve your opinion or you might [not] be as totally honest as you would because you are afraid to offend anybody because your main concern is the overall [group] relationship. You want to keep your cohort strong.

Two focus groups mentioned this aspect, but it was evident from the data from all four focus groups that they had a deep respect and affection for each other, perhaps setting the stage for stifling conversations to some degree. However, overall, the positive relationships that developed over time supported rich dialogue, while those students who stayed disengaged were peripheral to the mainstream of discussion and interaction (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006).

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

According to practitioners (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1997) of focus group methodology, a minimum group size should be five participants, which means that two of the four focus groups were under-sized. This might be a potential limitation if it contributed to a less robust data collection. In the first focus group (cohort 5), there were four participants, but this made up 50% of the cohort so it is probable that this was very representative of that cohort. The second focus group had only three participants from the seventeen who completed the program, which casts doubt on how representative this focus group was. Overall, 19 of the 76 students who completed the program, or who (cohort 6) are on track to finish this year, participated in the four focus groups for a 25% participation rate.

Because the qualifications for participation were simply an availability and willingness to participate, the focus groups had participants who were eager to share their

experiences in a group setting. The testimony from all the participants was unanimous on the fact that their closed cohort experience was at the most, personally transformative and at the least, professionally enlightening. Unheard from however, were those described by Joyce (1), "We had a couple of underachievers and I just wanted to jerk their chain when they were not behaving right – no accountability." Or those mentioned by Barbara (4), "We figured out who was going to bring something to the table and who we could all learn from and who kind of sat there and was doing [only] enough work to get the 'paper' [degree]."

All focus groups identified a subset of students who did not participate in the cohort experience by not being prepared for class or not engaging in the conversations that were a hallmark of these learning communities. None of these students joined the focus groups. Consequently, their story goes untold. This limitation of the assessment of the efficacy of the closed cohort learning model is an important opportunity for further research. Individual interviews, perhaps by phone, would be an effective way to reach out to this group.

The participants identified three influences that moderated the benefits of the closed cohort model. One was the lack of participation by some students mentioned previously. Another was the inclusion of under-qualified students in the program. As Arnold (4) pointed out, "With this program there's the economic reality that you have to fill the seats and you may have these great admission requirements but if you still have some open seats [you have to fill them]." The opportunity for research in this area would include a deeper understanding of the impact of the under-qualified student on the experiences and accomplishments of themselves and others:

Doug (5): I came into the programs with expectations that were so high… and I thought this is about time we have executive leadership as a serious pursuit of study, so I was very excited about that. I also had the expectation that the people who would be in the class had the same qualifications that were on the bill.
Linda (5) … or higher – competitive.

The final moderating influence on cohort outcomes was a consistent theme across all four focus groups, teaching efficacy. A sampling of participant comments:

Doug (4): What we got was an itinerant teacher who I think was singularly unqualified to teach and it was very disruptive but we got though that.

Joyce (1): The professor was the outsider. It was our cohort so the professor had to come in and earn … the respect. You know they had to make themselves a part of the cohort to be allowed to get in and some we allowed in closer than others, I think.

Brenda (6): The biggest disappointment I have is probably more with the teaching level than with our group. We've had people who seemed to stop teaching in the middle of the semester.

Mike (4): I believe the quality of the instructor is vital to the cohort model and if they are not well prepared and if they aren't good, or skillful in how you deal with a cohort then the quality of the cohort and the purpose of the cohort goes down the drain.

Clearly, the ability of the professor to engage this community of learners more in a facilitative role and less as subject matter expert will respect the needs and experiences of these students as adult learners. Of particular importance is the need for the professor to approach the cohort as a newcomer and appreciate the unique dynamics of teaching in a closed cohort. Continuing research focused on the traits and practices of successful cohort instructors would be a welcome addition to the body of knowledge supporting the closed cohort learning model.

The capture of expressive behaviors which was a part of the research methodology proved to be an important part of the data collection and analysis. The techniques

employed were primarily the design of the researcher and proved to be reasonably effective. It was a strain on the assistant moderator to capture all the observable behavior and either videotaping or additional observers might be effective. Further work with expressive behavior analysis as a research tool would serve the practice of qualitative study well.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study offer a number of opportunities for institutions of higher learning to provide more robust and productive communities of learning. Whether a program is full or part-time, the closed cohort model should be given strong consideration as the approach of choice for the reasons presented in this paper. It provides a superb platform for engaging adult learners and taking full advantage of their experiences (Currie & Knights, 2003). As the focus group participants have shown, the willingness to share their perspectives and to value those of others developed over time as trust, communication, and collaborative learning became stronger elements of the cohort. Here are some factors that contribute to that environment:

1. Clearly defined and executed admissions/screening standards.

2. A cohort-developed code of conduct or operating principles.

3. Established qualifications and demonstrated abilities for faculty.

4. A cohort of teachers for a cohort of students.

5. Criteria for dismissing students not contributing at an acceptable level.

6. Periodic retreats and/or social events to provide time for relationship building.

7. Student input and influence regarding courses, course content, and instructors.

A discussion of each factor follows.

Admission standards. Whatever standards are developed for admission to a cohort program, it is important that they be followed and should include some level of experience working in groups. It may be possible to address some deficiencies through other courses or postponing program entry until a prospective student can gain some work experience. What made the cohort so valuable was that it took advantage of adult learners and their need to share experiences and interact. As an instructor in the master's program, it was the researcher's experience that young students, those in their early to mid-twenties, were at a distinct disadvantage in the cohort. Their lack of experience and the resulting inability to engage in discussion was obvious. Consequently, mixing young students and older adults should be avoided.

Kathy (5): It has to be people that fit. The perfect example is the Tuesday night cohort. That's a large cohort but they [all] fit.

Roberta (4): In a closed cohort environment, it is critical that the starting point and the tools [student qualifications] are somewhat comparable … [if not] it slows the whole thing down and it keep you back from what you can get out of it.

Operating principles. An approach that should be included very early in the formation of the cohort is the development of a set of operating principles that will govern the functioning of the group. Created by the cohort, facilitated by a faculty member or consultant skilled in organizational processes, this set of principles will help manage expectations based on the rights and responsibilities set forth. Included should be expectations regarding preparation for behavior, class participation, confidentiality, and accountability. No operating principles were developed by any of the cohorts.

Qualified instructors. The focus groups were unanimous in their opinions regarding the importance of qualified, effective instructors. The instructor's subject matter knowledge is a given, but it is important to acknowledge and capitalize on the subject matter knowledge and experience of the cohort and integrate these into the classroom (Guskin & Marcy, 2003). A graduate cohort is presents a different type of teaching challenge for instructors and a faculty focused on effective classroom practices may be the most important factor in facilitating student learning and educational outcomes (Reder, 2007). As Charlie (1) observed, "I think sharing was a good word - the learning that came through for me was a sharing not a telling." Mike (4) offers a more direct assessment. "I believe the quality of the instructor is vital to the cohort model and if they are not well prepared and if they aren't … skillful in how you deal with a cohort, then the quality of the cohort and the purpose of the cohort goes down the drain." All focus groups were complimentary of the instructors who could bring pertinent, actionable topics to the group and who could employ a teaching approach that facilitated an engaging discussion among the cohort members (Bocchi, et al., 2004; Gabriel & MacDonald, 2002).

Doug (5): I don't know if this is a function of being a part of a cohort or if it's a function of being an adult learner. But the classrooms I got the most out of were classrooms that were offered by instructors who facilitated discussion and elicited comments from each one of the participants in a class. From hearing all those perspectives I was able to enrich my own perspective … I would never have gotten that from the book.

A cohort of instructors. One approach for improving the effectiveness of the faculty could be having a small core (or cohort) of instructors who can develop continuity in content and teaching style. Several of the focus groups shared their out-

look regarding ownership of the classroom or learning environment and a comment from Charlie (1) captures the essence of that outlook. "It was that ownership like you said drove the learning environment for the majority of people. Because it was our cohort – it was ours – I would agree with that.

To this end, a cohort of teachers would have at least two advantages. First, a cohort of 4-5 instructors would mean that instructor-cohort relationships could also develop more over the course of the program, and the instructor would not always be the 'outsider'. Second, the instructor cohort would facilitate a sharing of teaching techniques and a harmonizing of material so the course-to-course flow would be coordinated as suggested by Roberta (4): "The course overall felt very fragmented so each course felt isolated from the others. That is a result of … the faculty that is [just] teaching all these courses instead of working through these things together."

Dismissing students from the program. When groups come together to work toward a common goal, there is always the reality that all may not finish. Part of that reality is the possibility that members may be dismissed from the group for the good of the community. Given the relational aspect of the closed cohort, this possibility may approach being a certainty or at least it was in Doug's (4) view. "When I started there were people who should not have been here." Preparing for this event begins with some of the factors already mentioned. A set of operating principles unanimously approved by the cohort provides an objective measure of student conduct to be used by the administration and faculty as necessary to remediate or terminate a recalcitrant cohort member. Facilitating this process,

would be the cohort of faculty who could offer multiple perspectives on the student in question.

Retreats and social events.   The development of a set of operating principles could be one of the key objectives of a cohort retreat at the beginning of the program. Because many of the cohort members were working full-time and had families and other obligations, socializing outside of class was very difficult to schedule. Therefore, it would be more advantageous for the program leadership and faculty to arrange and lead a retreat. Arnold commented on just such an approach that he experienced as a member of a previous closed cohort experience.

Arnold (4): To get the cohort on the same page we had this set of retreats or workshops. So before we start the program let's get everybody mentally in the right framework because you're coming from different backgrounds and then we'll launch into the program.

Such events might also have the benefit of heading off the dynamics that concerned Kathy; "When we were a larger cohort I never felt that togetherness; I never felt that because it felt like there were little cohorts like cliques inside the cliques." Providing a meal before class is a great opportunity for relationship building.

Student input and influence.   Leveraging the input of the cohort of students and the cohort of instructors could provide the basis of a continuous improvement process. Giving students the opportunity to shape content and learning activities while still in the program has the potential to add even more value to the curriculum. Such a process would be a negotiated arrangement, with instructors still ultimately responsible for the content and delivery.

Conclusion

The focus group format, that included members from the same cohort, meeting on the same floor, in the same building, at the same time, recreated their cohort experience as much as possible. Although not stated as a research objective, the researcher was curious to see if the same environment would be a catalyst for the same interaction that was the hallmark of the closed cohort (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). All the participants were appreciative of the opportunity to gather again. Many even voted the box lunches an improvement over program food! They certainly did not want to be left out.

Barbara (4): I responded really fast because I thought people would be fighting over - just to get to see each other again.

Christine (4): Me too!

Indeed, all the focus groups began immediately to share, discuss, object, and challenge each other. More importantly, they learned from each other as they listened to each other's perspectives (Potts & Schultz, 2008). Therefore, these individuals seem to have internalized an approach to learning that they bring forth, even in a focus group, under the right circumstances. Some have commented that they have taken this approach to their jobs and that it has improved their effectiveness (Scribner & Donaldson, 2001).

Doug (5): I look at personnel development entirely different from the way I used to look at it before I started the program. I see that in myself too, by the way I point that inward.

Christine (4): If it had not been for this program I would have been in the same rut at my job and I have not switched jobs. I'm in the same company, if anything the

company's worse. But I love it every day more and it's because of this program. It's because of what I've gained.

The participants of the focus groups were, and still are, heavily invested in their cohort experience. They shared a multitude of advantages and shortcomings, but held a unanimous belief in the value of the closed cohort as a very effective learning community that integrated experiential and academic learning (Guskin & Marcy, 2003). This experience, this phenomenon, holds transformational potential for students to an extent that I did not anticipate. This was apparently attributable to the deeper levels of socialization characteristic of closed cohorts (Chairs, et al., 2002; Yerkes, 1995). It was apparent that all cohort members who participated in this research experienced a level of regard for each other that was remarkable and came away with a personal worldview that was richer because of their willingness to share themselves with each other. This cohesive environment encouraged risk taking, critical reflection and a shared understanding built on a motivation to embrace multiple perspectives (Brooks, 1998). As shared in their own words, it was the development of trust over time that laid the foundation for learning. As trust developed, so did their ability to share, discuss and challenge in an effort to make meaning from the experiences of the group and to develop knowledge that is not necessarily readily apparent, but instead influences beliefs and attitudes (Legge, et al., 2005).

So where does this place the closed cohort learning model as a means for influencing the collaboration and innovation that organizations need to prosper? Why should institutions of higher learning value this approach to learning as part of their mission to provide educational experiences that add value for the business community and consequently attract the funding of organizations through tuition reimbursement? The students

who have embraced the cohort experience have become equipped with an outlook on learning and organizational success that separates them from the rest of us. They have described in detail how the development of trust and communication in a group, over time, opens a wide variety of perspectives, worldviews, and opportunities to learn and collaborate (Brunard & Kleiner, 1994). They have shared how the knowledge of themselves, their personal transformation, has come at the hands of their cohort and how it has influenced their effectiveness at work. This transformation is mostly non-cognitive - composed of changed beliefs and values that can prompt growth in identity development and self-esteem (Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006).

Because learning, collaboration and performance outcomes a closely linked (Fenning, 2004), recreating the cohort environment in teams and work groups can provide the basis for innovation and organizational success (Haltiwanger & Ferdig, 2003). Students from the closed-cohort program studied are now prepared to participate in the type of learning culture that supports innovation (Hay Group, 2005B). Some of these cohorts have experienced unsettling organizational issues that have given them an emotional reserve that translates to personal resiliency that can be critical in responding to change and a challenge in their lives (McClusky (1990). Since a collaborative learning environment is a component of innovation (Leslie, et al., 2006), the closed cohort learning model can help organizations close the gap between organizational learning and innovation (Calantone, et al., 2002).

Going forward it is this researcher's hope that this approach to learning will continue to be nurtured and improved in order to build on the approach and outcomes de-

scribed in this research. Perhaps these comments from cohort 1 more than two years after

the end of their program speak to the power of the closed cohort.

> Joyce (1): I think the degree was the least of what I took away – I think probably for me was it was two years of learning about myself – self reflection which the cohort helped me do… sort of like holding a mirror up and having these people reflect back to you.

> Terry (1): It evolved there at the very end … and when trust evolved, we got better at trusting each other and we learned more and benefitted from that.

> Charlie (1): I would not have wanted it any other way than the group that we had and what we experienced and what we learned. It was very valuable. From a cohort perspective, I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

> Moderator: Anything else you would like to comment on?

> Joyce (1): I'm glad to see my cohort buddies!

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Appendix A

A sampling of graduate programs offering a closed-cohort format

Masters of Business Administration (MBA)

University of Texas at Arlington Hartford

Lamar (Texas) University

University of Texas at El Paso

University of Colorado at Denver

University of Maryland University College

Christian Brothers University

California State University at Chico

University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute at

Temple University

San Francisco State University

University of Pennsylvania

Xavier (OH) University

Fordham University

University of Miami (FL)

University of Memphis

Educational Leadership (MA & Ed.D)

Southern Connecticut University

Purdue University

St. Louis University

University of Maine Wilmington

Delaware State University

University of Wisconsin at Madison

Drake University

University of North Carolina at

Teacher Education (MA, M.Ed. & Ed.D.))

 Park University (MO)

Arizona State University

Louisiana State University

University of British Columbia

Utah State University

University of Indianapolis

Drury University (MO)

University of Minnesota at Duluth

Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Guide

Interview Guide: Student experience in a closed cohort master's program.

A. The cohort experience

I would like to start by asking you to reflect on your cohort, it's members, your relationships & experiences

1. How would you describe the closed cohort experience?
2. Did your cohort experience change over time? In what way?
3. What was the most meaningful aspect of your cohort?
4. Did the cohort experience differ from your initial expectations? In what way?
5. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your cohort experience?

B. The learning environment

Now I would ask you to reflect on the learning environment in your cohort

1. How would you describe the way in which learning occurred?
2. Did this change over time? Why?
3. How did the learning environment differ from other programs?
4. How do you feel about the learning environment in your closed-cohort?
5. Do you have any other comments regarding learning in your cohort?

C. Outcomes of the cohort experience

Next, I would like for you to reflect on what you gained from participating in a cohort master's program.

1. Besides the degree, what other outcomes did you experience? How important are they to you?
2. From an outcomes standpoint, what did you gain that you had not anticipated?
3. Of these outcomes, which do you attribute specifically to the closed cohort format?
4. Is there anything else you want me to know about what you gained from your cohort experience?

Appendix C
Participant Consent Form

I am aware that the present study involves research and that its purpose is to investigate the experiences of students in a closed-cohort master's degree program. Using a focus group (group interview) format, I will describe my experiences in as much detail as possible. I understand that the study by Fred Ellrich is a requirement for the Doctor of Education degree and that Fred Ellrich is working under the supervision of Dr. Patricia H. Murrell, Professor of Education, at The University of Memphis.

I agree to participate in the study and I am willing to share my experiences with Fred Ellrich, and a research assistant in a focus group setting composed of members of my cohort. The focus group will be approximately 90 to 120 minutes in length, will be tape recorded, and then transcribed for later analysis. I am aware that I will receive a copy of the focus group transcript for my review and will forward any corrections to Fred Ellrich. I am aware that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that my refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. If I choose to withdraw from the study, any information about me and any data that I have provided will be destroyed.

I have been informed that the risks associated with participating in the study are minimal and I am aware that if I have questions about any aspect of the study or in the event of a research-related injury, I can contact Dr. Patricia Murrell at (901) 678-2775. If I should have any questions about my rights as a research participant, I can contact the Chair of the Committee for the protection of Human Research Participants at (901) 678-2533. I also understand that that The University of Memphis does not have funds budgeted to compensate for any injury, damage or other expenses that I might incur as a result of participating in this study.

I am aware that the information collected during this study will be kept confidential within the limits allowed by law. I am also aware that I have a responsibility to protect the confidentiality of the other participants in my focus group. When transcribing the taped interview, Fred Ellrich will use pseudonyms (i.e. false names) for my name and for the names of any other individuals whom I discuss. These pseudonyms will also be used in preparing a written report of the study. Any details for the interview recording that might identify me or any individuals whom I discuss will also be altered during the transcription process. Fred Ellrich, the research assistant, and members of Fred's dissertation committee will be the only individuals with access to the tape recorded interview and the interview transcript, and these will be stored in a secure place. I understand that when Fred Ellrich has completed the study, he will discuss the research findings with me and provide me with a written report of the findings. I also understand that the data collected from me during this study may be used by Fred Ellrich for other research purposes or for developing a paper for presentation or publication.

Appendix C
Participant Consent Form

_____   _____

Signature of Research Participant   Date

_____

Printed name

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   Date

_____

Printed name

Appendix D
Expressive Behaviors Reference List (with Codes)

Behavior type: Facial (F) Tone of Voice (T) Body movement (B)

Interpretation of expressive behaviors:

1 Approval/Disapproval 2

3 Support/ Challenge 4

5 Engagement/Disengagement 6

7 Submission/Dominance 8

9 Understanding/Confusion 10

11 Conflict avoidance

12 Ambivalence

Adapted from:

Ambady, N., & Rosenthal, R. (1992). Thin slices of expressive behavior as predictors of interpersonal consequences: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin , 111* (2), 256-274.

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Appendix E
Co-Moderator Observation Form

Focus Group # _____ Question # _____

Behavior type: Facial (F) Tone of Voice (T) Body movement (B)	Participant	Participant	Participant
Assistant Moderator	Participant	TABLE	Participant
1 Approval/Disapproval 2 3 Support/Challenge 4 5 Engage/Disengage 6 7 Submission/Dominance 8 9 Understand/Confusion 10 11 Conflict avoidance 12 Ambivalence 13 Remember 14 Learning	Participant	Participant	Moderator

Appendix F
Categories and Themes

1) The cohort experience

    a) Membership

    b) Relationships and Support

        i) Family atmosphere

        ii) Return to school

    c) Trust

2) The learning environment

    a) Collaborative learning and accountability

    b) Teaching efficacy

    c) Communication

3) Outcomes

    a) Leadership skills

    b) Personal growth and awareness

    c) Friendships

    d) Improved job performance

4) Unintended consequences