Cohort Based Learning in Teacher Education

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Cohort-based learning is an increasingly popular form of non-traditional education in M.A. and Ph.D. programs which is based on the development of a cohort of students who from the commencement of their program move through common courses and other experiences together, using the power of interpersonal relationships to enhance learning, interpersonal interaction and support, and, ultimately, program completion.

Definition

Cohort-based programs are characterized by the members’ intense identification with the group. From the commencement of their program, students move together through common courses and other experiences, and complete together. The power of interpersonal relationships enhances learning, interpersonal interaction and support. The faculty is also cohort based. The primary unit of analysis is neither the individual nor social institutions but rather the informal Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998) that people form as they pursue shared enterprises over time.

As McDermott (in Murphy 1999:17) puts it:

Learning traditionally gets measured as on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads… [Here] learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part.

Program design

It is important to understand that cohort-based learning describes a whole program, not a series of courses. The program is carefully designed and developed, starting with the first meeting, which is an intensive group dynamic type of experience. All administrative concerns, support and advising focus on the group. Feedback and evaluation are ongoing, including corrective measures during the course. The students know their feedback will be used. The program is typically pass/fail rather than graded. Courses are offered in a certain order, decided on by faculty. The students know that each course builds on the ones before, and that faculty plan it this way.

Teaching-learning strategies

Cohort-based learning is for adult learners. Two principles are key:

- Adults continue to learn throughout their lifetimes
- Their past experiences help or hinder the learning process
The multiple roles and responsibilities of adults result in a different orientation to learning from children and adolescents, while the many accumulated life experiences of adults result in distinct preferences for learning methods and environments. The exchange of ideas and critical feedback among students is both expected and encouraged. For adults returning to school, the fear of failure is great, and so potential learners are attracted to the overall package because the selling point is group completion. They are willing to give up course selection in return for a greater certainty of completing the program (Saltiel, I.M., & Russo, C.S. 2001).

The students have considerable access to faculty, who are partners with the students in the learning process. Instruction comes from a faculty who is knowledgeable, invested and trained in the program. The interaction among the faculty is also cohort-based, and is a model for the relationship among students.

Case Study

The MAT program at the SIT Graduate Institute has been involved in cohort-based teacher education for 40 years, and is the oldest and largest of its kind. Its design is based on the Experiential Learning Cycle, with the internship in the middle of the program. Cohort-building techniques include regular check-ins for giving and receiving feedback, community building activities, and skills taught in peer mentoring and active listening. The success of this program has been attributed to cohort-based learning itself; the faculty’s commitment to its own development as a cohort, to teacher education and to the program; the ongoing assessment of student progress and of the program itself; and its commitment to lifelong learning.

Concluding remarks

The magic of a cohort comes from good programming that results in learning, combined with the connections, the networking, and the feeling that the learners get when they know they are all on the same journey together.

The specificity of cohort-based programs are, by design, limited to a precisely defined student with distinct and clear goals that cannot be met by the traditional academic program model. It is this basic tenet of the cohort-based program that will expand your organization. If you build a cohort-based program, they will come.

Saltiel & Russo, 2001: 112

References