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Book Review – Cohort Programming and Learning

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Cohort learning appears to have arrived: A search on *Google* in November 2001 returned over 119,000 hits on the term *cohort learning*, ranging from medical and other professional programs, to military, and even K-12. As a vehicle for target marketing of programs, with clear planning and administrative advantages for students and institutions, cohort-based learning is evidently becoming increasingly attractive to program managers wanting to provide an option to traditional delivery.

Cohort learning in its most basic form may be defined as the formation of a group of from 12 to 25 (usually adult) 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. Cohort-based programs are characterized by members' intense group identification with its cohort, matched by special administrative and instructional provisions on the part of the offering institution (i.e., streamlined registration and materials distribution; weekend, evening and summer courses). Technology is increasingly used to facilitate contacts among cohort members when they are not in face-to-face contact.

The authors come to their subject from backgrounds which suggest long-term involvement with alternative programming. Saltiel is presently an academic at Troy State University, Phenix City, Alabama, and has private sector and adult education experience. Her own training includes doctoral studies of cohort-based programs. Russo directs a New Jersey-based international continuing professional development and an employee-training program. Both authors have been active in leading, researching and publicizing workplace-related training developments.

The book's chapters illustrate its focus, and provide an outline of its contents:

Cohort programming and learning

Understanding cohort programs

Program design and development

Curriculum development

Teaching-learning strategies

The cohort program learner

Implications for practice

The future of cohort programming and learning

While they definitely promote cohort learning "We encourage you to try it. You will probably like it!" (p. 111), the authors makes a sound case for the timeliness of cohort-based programming, *for some types of students and programs.* Specifically, cohort programs might benefit students who:

- Are self-directed and mature learners, clear about their learning goals

- Enjoy collaborating with others for learning and mutual support

- Are not attracted to traditional delivery methods and conditions

- Dislike constantly having to rearrange their schedules as courses change (or, more positively, want a clearly laid out, sequential program)

- Are prepared to give up some choice to eliminate the problem of finding needed courses closed or unavailable

- Are highly motivated to complete a credential

Programs for which cohorts are appropriate include courses that are (or could be) sequential and interrelated; include students that usually move through program requirements more or less in lock step; include faculty who are willing to share unusual conditions such as weekend and summer teaching, and greater advising and counseling duties; include non-traditional students; have a strong connection to the workplace; include students who prepare for certain professions that have a tradition of cohort based training (e.g., medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, and pharmacology).

The disadvantages in cohort-based learning are actually variations of some of the main positives. The lock-step nature of the program means rigid sequencing, with few or no electives; the quality of the interpersonal dynamics within the cohort are critical to the whole experience; scheduling is intense, demanding excellent attendance and participation; the pace is usually accelerated; and the program tends to rely upon a small number of faculty.

What might be sacrificed in a cohort-based experience, "even by those who might ideally be suited to it," Saltiel and Russo admit that there is a potential dark side for cohorts (p. 101), in which programs may become incestuous, show signs of inbreeding and excessive inward focus, and develop a narrow outlook

on themselves and others. Cohorts that go bad share the same tendencies as any self-absorbed group in any environment: they become convinced of the centrality and unique legitimacy of their own restricted experience. The danger may be greater for cohort learning groups, because they often meet and interact over an extended period with only a small number of others, in an environment that may be lacking outside (the cohort) contacts.

In distance education we are familiar with this danger, evident in those on-line groups which bristle with snide exclusivity, "meet[ing] largely to promote their own interests and to reinforce their own like-mindedness, excluding anyone who disagrees [and] [a]s a consequence reinforc[ing] the fragmentation and factionalism of modern society" (Shenk, p. 111).

The antidote to exclusivity and disengagement from the real world is linkages to others. The authors recommend such linkages for cohort learners, advising instructors and program managers to arrange face-to-face networking opportunities with outsiders. Such networking can create and revitalize linkages and foster partnerships with outsiders who are firmly rooted in realities beyond the cohort, yet who understand the issues and have an interest in the program's success. This is not revolutionary advice, but we know from our DE experience that it is important. If cohort programming were to become reliant on technology, increasing the virtual content of the experience, the potential for alienation and asocial behaviour would consequently increase. The wise advice of these writers is that such effects be prevented through partnerships with bodies outside the cohort.

Cohort programming is not for everyone, nor for every institution. The authors warn that cohorts tend to be innovative and unconventional, becoming (if not designed to be) de facto test-beds for new kinds of teaching and learning activities and approaches, and demanding innovative institutional and program policies and procedures. Cohort programs tend to attract people who differ from the student mainstream, with different expectations of the institution and its personnel. They can be impatient and as individuals, high maintenance administratively. In a cohort, many of these characteristics are addressed or ameliorated to the benefit (and relief) of both the institution and the student.

The authors conclude that cohort programming is here to stay, and will grow as interest increases in and more resources are devoted to contextualized, integrated learning in the workplace, and in response to specific social and learner group needs. As tools and models for asynchronous interaction of various kinds become more available, the prediction is likely to be proven correct. If greater access and equity continue to be goals of education and training, it is easy to see how cohort learning could be a means for achieving them. For anyone intrigued by the prospect, this slim book would be a fine primer.

References

Shenk, D. (1997). *Data smog.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.