Being Students Again: Balancing Ambiguities, Expectations, and Responsibilities

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Psychological principles define the relationship between motivation and lifelong learning. Several of these principles relate to students returning to school to complete doctoral programs: (a) Learning is an individual process filtered through personal constructions of meaning; (b) learning is promoted through interactions with others in collaborative environments; (c) learning is initiated through individual interpretations based on prior experiences that can enhance or hinder the learning process; and (d) motivation is heightened by quality personal relationships (McCombs, 1991). Learning environments and their outcomes are affected by the social interactions, interpersonal relationships, and communication styles of those present (Lambert & McCombs, 1998). Learning is influenced by the prior experiences and unique perspectives that students bring to classroom settings.

The University of Kentucky EdD program in Community and Technical College Leadership (EdD Program) utilizes sound psychological principles in an executive model cohort program for full-time employees of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS). Facilitators of the program intentionally designed a learning model that promotes a healthy balance among professional, personal, and academic responsibilities. The EdD program employs a learner-centered approach that requires students to not only take responsibility for their own development, but also to promote the development of their classmates (Foreman & Johnston, 1999). Active involvement is challenging because students work at community and technical colleges dispersed across the state and rely heavily on asynchronous electronic communication modes to complete course assignments.

We posit that the EdD Program model assists cohort members with the difficult transition of being students again after years, even decades. Specifically, the cohort model helps students to (a) build upon their strengths early in the program to build individual confidence, (b) establish a strong learning community through intentional cohort building activities, and (c) apply their new skills and knowledge in real-world settings within the community and technical college system. To support these assertions, we begin this paper with an overview of the literature related to adult learning and efficacy of cohort programs in helping returning students succeed. Next, we summarize common themes reported by the EdD Program cohort members about their experiences of being students again. We close with some recommendations for action discovered from our research and experiences as doctoral students with busy professional and personal lives.

Adult Learning

One theory of adult learning, called andragogy, suggests five principles about learning experiences for adults: (a) Past experiences influence the way new knowledge is accepted and integrated; (b) adult students require self-directed learning opportunities; (c) readiness to learn is related to a need to apply the new knowledge; (d) adults think about learning from a problem-centered perspective and (e) internal and external factors influence adults’ motivation to learn (Knowles, 1987). These principles especially apply to adult students returning to school while trying to balance professional, personal, and learning responsibilities. The literature supports the efficacy of applying andragogy when designing adult

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learning programs because it recognizes and values the unique experiences adults bring into the learning environment (Bartz & Calabrese, 1991).

Mahoney (1991) identifies two types of environmental factors that influence the learning experience: (a) external issues consisting of situations involving work, home, and community; and (b) internal issues comprised of health, attitudes, and interpersonal conflicts. Successful learning environments attempt to minimize the adverse effects of this “baggage” that students bring into the classroom. Students who return to school after a number of years typically possess a high number of environmental factors that present challenges to the learning experience.

**External Factors**

Typically, external challenges to adult learning environments stem from three sources: family obligations, work responsibilities, community service (Mahoney, 1991). These issues often require students to make difficult decisions about priorities in order to manage all of their commitments. For students who have been out of school for awhile, existing responsibilities must be evaluated in light of the new demands of an academic program. Alternative and creative approaches must be employed so that external problems do not significantly diminish the learning process. Adult educators can take several actions to help students overcome barriers related to external issues by acknowledging their importance and offering flexible learning options that are relevant and student-directed (Mahoney, 1991).

**Internal Factors**

Three common internal issues faced by adult students include self-expectations, health problems, and feelings of self-worth. Adults returning to school may have doubts about their ability to succeed after being out of an academic environment for many years. Health problems, not only for students but also for their close family members, can present barriers to learning. Feelings of self-worth stem from thoughts of guilt and inadequacy associated with having to turn down activities that previously were important. Adult educators can assist in minimizing the adverse effect of internal issues by getting to know their students through informal gatherings and promoting self-efficacy by providing positive learning experiences with meaningful feedback (Mahoney, 1991).

**Cohort Programs**

Cohort programs have documented success as an effective model for adults who are returning to school. A cohort is defined here as a group of learners who complete an entire program of study as a single unit (Lawrence, 2002). Effective cohort groups share three common sets of characteristics: (a) Members feel important and valued for their expertise and thus experience a sense of belonging; (b) there is a clear and common purpose for being together; and (c) activities are based on interaction and interdependence (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000). These qualities address some of the external and internal problems faced by students that can be resolved by the support and encouragement offered by the relationships developed through the cohort structure. Multiple studies indicate that cohort students demonstrate a high degree of commitment and motivation resulting in higher program completion rates (Barnett et al., 2000; Hill, 1995).
Common Themes from Cohort-Member Responses

The EdD Program cohort is comprised of 22 students representing faculty and staff from 13 of 16 KCTCS-member institutions. Participants work full-time and thus must balance a variety of personal and professional obligations in addition to graduate coursework. To collect input from our cohort peers, we administered a “being a student again” survey using the SurveyMonkey Web site to solicit anonymous information about their experiences of being back in the classroom again. We received 100% participation from our peers and discovered three themes as we analyzed the data: (a) perceptional changes about the cohort and our leadership abilities; (b) life-changing events; and (c) coping strategies. Additionally, cohort members gave recommendations for action for people considering becoming a student again, which we share in the last section of our paper.

Perceptional Change of the Cohort Model and Leadership Abilities

Perceptions about the cohort model and ourselves as leaders have changed for many EdD Program participants since applying for the program. This section begins by addressing both the initial and current perceptions of the cohort model. Next, events that prompted a perceptional change are discussed. Finally, we examine perceptional changes as about ourselves as leaders that have occurred after completing the first two years of the program.

Perceptional change of the cohort model. Forty-eight percent of responses on our survey indicate that our peers initially perceived neutrality or some degree of negativity toward cohorts and collaboration. The most concern stemmed from working with others on large projects, especially since we live extreme distances from one another across the state. Realizing that we have unique learning styles and work ethics, some students were concerned about relying on others for group grades. Much of this stemmed from past negative group experiences. For example, one cohort member stated, “I did think there was a chance the classes could be fragmented and uncommunicative, which would have made the cohort a more difficult learning experience. There was obviously going to be stress from the different work styles of people but assumed that could be managed.”

Positive initial perceptions of cohorts centered on the concept of remaining in an intact group that would progress together through the program. One student wrote,

My initial impression was that it would be a group of people taking the same classes together throughout the degree. This would allow for a strong network to be developed and support among colleagues who all work for KCTCS. I did not realize how much collaboration would be required for every course.

Several students enjoy working collaboratively, and thus, the cohort model appealed to them.

When asked if their initial impression of the cohort model had changed, 68% responded that it had. In analyzing responses to this question, we discovered that 82% responded favorably toward the cohort model, which is a 30% increase from favorable comments regarding initial perceptions of the cohort model. The main theme from respondents was the enjoyment and appreciation of the friendships, networking, and supportive environment that has formed within the cohort. This is clearly illustrated in the following comment:

I have formed real friendships within the cohort and find this to be a source of support and encouragement. The collaborative teamwork skills developed through the program have also made me feel very positive toward working in a group. Many of the completed projects truly are better than what I could have done on my own.
Several students have become aware not only of their strengths, but also of those of the entire cohort. Realizing that we utilize different strengths allows us to plan and organize assignments and tasks more effectively.

Of students whose impression of the cohort had changed over time, no one offered a single event or experience as a source of that change. Rather, our peers overwhelmingly stated that our thinking changed gradually over time. After completing projects successfully with different group members and getting to know one another socially, new thinking about collaboration and group dynamics began to take shape.

Possibly the most important type of cohort interaction has occurred in the social realm. Time spent outside of the classroom, not working on projects, has been crucial in the cohort’s development. One student noted,

> Visiting the local [establishments and events] gave cohort members time to interact outside the “traditional” classroom. We typically shared meals together and “hung out” in the evenings to further our lively discussions from class. The colloquiums we participated in during Year 1 were also effective in helping establish relationships that have continued through today.

Further, friendships formed have allowed us to motivate, support, and encourage one another. According to another peer, the positive aspects of learning in the cohort are “motivation, support, encouragement, improving weaknesses—we lift one another up.”

Nonetheless, some students remain at odds with the cohort model. Eighteen percent of responses contained negative overtones regarding collaboration, particularly regarding the fact that some of us are not fulfilling our group roles. For example, one student stated, “Those who are late for class on a regular basis, who do not wish to work in groups, who can never meet a deadline drag the rest of us down.” Additionally, one respondent was concerned with the possible formation of cliques, stating, “I think some greater effort is made to adhere to common norms and work ethics. Members are willing to help others, which was not anticipated. A certain cliquishness has set in perhaps because [we are preparing for] group dissertations.” This comment may reflect the concern that some of us have formed groups for our dissertations, while others have not.

**Perceptual change of leadership abilities.** Half of the survey respondents indicated that their career priorities have changed over the course of the first two years in the program. When comments were analyzed, it become clear that our self-concepts as leaders have improved dramatically. For example, every comment reflected having set higher goals professionally. While one respondent stated, “I am more driven and have more confidence in my abilities,” and another asserted, “I definitely see the bigger picture and my role in it now.”

Comments regarding career ambitions are overwhelmingly positive. Our cohort now sets higher goals in terms of career aspirations and leadership. One response summed up this transformation: “I never would have considered becoming a college president prior to my success in the cohort. Now I am open to any and all opportunities to continue my work and leadership within the community and technical college setting.” Another peer stated simply, “The cohort has allowed dreams to become reality.”
Balancing Doctoral Work and Full-Time Work

Becoming a doctoral student in addition to continuing to work full-time and maintaining a family was a challenge for every member of the cohort. Most individuals had been out of school for some time and had to make a number of adjustments to being a student again. The challenges facing us were reflected in the responses to the question concerning initial impressions of the cohort program. Several members specifically expressed “concerns” and “skepticism” over group work and grades dependent upon the outcomes of those efforts. One specifically mentioned previous “bad experiences with group work in the past,” while a peer indicated a preference for working independently.

The EdD program presented this group of adult students with the challenge of adapting study habits cultivated over many years of education to a new set of skills requiring collaboration and cooperation. Nineteen of the 22 survey respondents indicated they had made significant changes in their academic work habits. They specifically mentioned that they had had to change their “thought process” and learn to think more “critically,” to work more quickly to “maintain pace with the cohort,” rather than working at their own pace, and work in a “much more collaborative” fashion. Others mentioned that they did more outside reading than in previous programs to inform their opinions and now feel confident making more significant contributions to the group. Working “as a team” created an “additional sense of responsibility to the cohort.” Members indicated they felt pressured to “put forth extra effort” in order not to “let their cohort members down.” This sense of additional personal responsibility to the larger group recurred frequently throughout the survey responses.

Cohort members’ responses to questions that addressed their efforts to balance work, family, and school obligations indicated that this task presented a major hurdle for the group. One question on the survey asked, How did you maintain a balance between work, school, and personal life? What challenges did the cohort model present to maintaining this balance? Several of our peers indicated they did not feel they had been very successful in adapting to the increased responsibility and workload. The replies to the first part of this question included phrases that we link together into sentences that capture our peer’s collective responses: Trying to meet the multiple demands on me “really takes an effort.” Adding doctoral studies to my already busy schedule “has really been tough” and thus “sometimes I can’t balance” my responsibilities well. “I have not balanced [my commitments] as well as I would like to” and although I “still adapting,” the task is simply “an ongoing challenge.” “I don’t know that you can say there is ever a balance” because “a lot of things have gone undone that should have been done.”

Many students reported that in order to cope with their additional responsibilities, they had been forced to make “sacrifices” in other areas of their lives. Several students specifically cited “sleeping less,” while others reported “golfing less” and “decreasing [their] community service.” A common adaptation among our peers was to reduce the amount of time spent with family members. Cohort members indicated they had “missed too many soccer games and birthday parties,” had to rely on their spouses “to handle more domestic issues, and had to simply “say no to personal commitments.”

The students reported specific challenges to their efforts to balance work, school, and personal life. Several mentioned “meeting deadlines” and “getting assignments done” as major issues, particularly during “periods when a lot of work is due in a short timeframe.” Others reported “feeling overwhelmed” at times by the “huge commitment both in time and effort.” The primary stressor reported by the majority of students was the pressure to perform well and in a timely manner so their actions would not adversely affect the members of their workgroups.
“Keeping on task to get assignments done so as not to hold up the group or team effort” was a theme that resonated throughout many of the cohort members’ survey responses. One student wrote, “I feel increased pressure to not only perform but perform well because my actions affect others.” Others reflected the feeling of being pulled in different directions by competing pressures. For example, one respondent shared, “I have to give up family responsibilities to meet my responsibilities to the cohort,” while another commented, “It is sometimes difficult to consider the needs of others in groups when trying to manage my family, work, and study schedule.” These statements epitomize the struggle that participants in the EdD program experience in trying to manage their time and uphold their responsibilities to those who are important to them.

Although many of our peers experienced stress as a result of their sense of obligation toward their workgroups and the larger cohort, they also noted that the cohort was also the source of support and encouragement for them. While struggling to maintain the pace and workload of the program and feeling the pressure to avoid dragging down the rest of their group, our peers shared that they turned to other members of the group for support. In fact, several students cited the support they received from their peers as one of the primary benefits of the cohort program. They indicated they had developed “a sense of closeness and bonding” with their peers and could call on one another “at any time for support, advice, and/or encouragement.” They recounted “very supportive” conversations, “trust and faith in one another,” provision of “motivation” and “encouragement” when experiencing doubts, and a “sense of confidence and belonging.” One cohort member commented, “We have become a family, both professionally and personally.”

**Dealing with Life-Changing Events**

Numerous life changes have occurred for many of the cohort members since their acceptance into the EdD program. For many, simply being back in school has created a dramatic life change. Survey results indicate 68% of the cohort members have not been enrolled in a graduate program for more than 5 years; for 36% it has been more than 10 years since they have been students. Balancing the demands of doctoral studies has created tremendous changes in our lifestyles, priorities, and family interactions. For some, adapting to becoming a student again has presented huge challenges.

Survey results indicate that nearly two-thirds of the cohort members experienced a major personal event in their lives since beginning the program. These events include deaths of close family members, births of children and grandchildren, their own marriages and divorces, and marriages of children. These experiences, regardless of the positive or negative impact they have on a cohort member, can cause people to lose focus on issues and change the priorities in their lives. As a result of life events described above, the cohort has experienced attrition: Six of the original 28 members of the cohort withdrew during the first year of the program.

For those who experienced major life changing events but remained active cohort members, survey results indicate a consistent theme as to why they did not drop out of the program. Most respondents identified support, encouragement, and feeling of value from their other cohort members as reasons for survival. Receiving encouragement for cohort peers was the reason one student decided not to withdraw. Others shared that the family-like atmosphere and support of others was one reason for their success in the program, and some identified the confidence from the other cohort members as vital toward their keeping up with course requirements.
Survey respondents also mentioned the assistance by cohort or group members in reassigning responsibilities to others while the respondent was dealing with major life issues. Allowing work to be shared created a deep appreciation for cohort peers. As a result, a culture of group survival has emerged through a thoughtful and understanding learning environment. Sharing responsibilities allowed for a stronger cohort to be developed and has sustained the cohort as a whole. In fact, it appears from our analysis of the survey data that in many instances, the life-changing events actually created greater appreciation of other cohort members. Our cohort as a whole is more socially engaged after class; as time progresses, the social aspect of the cohort continues to evolve.

Recommendations for Action

Cohort members made recommendations for action for individuals considering a cohort graduate program. Based on their experiences in the EdD program, suggestions fell into three major categories: (a) program and career goal alignment, (b) external supports, and (c) program design. Several cohort members recommended that individuals carefully evaluate their career aspirations and ensure that their program of study will result in the learning and credentials required for their aspired pathway. Even if the program is convenient and meets other personal preferences, it must be aligned with individuals’ career goals to justify the intense time and effort that will be required. Another recommendation is to assess one’s external supports already in place to assure emotional and other types of support during graduate studies. Several cohort members mentioned the commitment by KCTCS administrators and college presidents as a determining factor to enroll in the EdD program. In addition to the employee tuition waiver program, KCTCS allows cohort members time off for courses. Some colleges and supervisors offer additional assistance on an individual basis.

Family and personal support are essential. Thus, honest discussions with spouses and other significant people about the time commitment and effort must be held prior to starting a doctoral program.

A final recommendation involves selecting a program that fits well with the individual’s personal learning styles and professional responsibilities. The following survey response summarizes the overall spirit of the recommendations for action: “Have a good support system. Filter out as many other activities as possible (extra teaching, part time employment, etc.). Arrange for family time so you still have a family when you are finished. Enjoy yourself because it is one of the best experiences you will ever have!”

References


Appendix A
Survey of Cohort: Being a Student Again

1. What is your highest academic degree?
   ____ Bachelor of Arts
   ____ Bachelor of Science
   ____ Master of Arts
   ____ Master of Science
   ____ Other (Please describe: _____________________)

2. How long has it been since you were actively pursuing a degree prior to enrollment of this Cohort?
   ____ Less than 5 years
   ____ 5-10 years
   ____ Greater than 10 years

3. How did the idea of a cohort environment influence your decision to apply to the program? What was your initial impression of the cohort setting and how has that changed?

4. How have your priorities changed since joining the EdD Cohort?

5. Did any significant events occur in your life since being enrolled in the cohort i.e. births, family illness or death, divorce, marriage, etc.? How did the cohort model help you in persisting through these periods?

6. How have your career ambitions changed as a result of being in the EdD Cohort?

7. Explain how your study skills differ from previous degrees.

8. How did you maintain a balance among work, school and personal life? What challenges did the cohort model present to maintaining this balance?

9. What types of interactions outside of the class/formal instruction enhanced your learning and/or strengthened the cohort community? What were the benefits/challenges associated with these informal activities?

10. Did the cohort model give you or other members an opportunity to share expertise to assist other members or the cohort as a whole? Please give specific examples.

11. What are some suggestions you have for full-time employees who are considering returning to work on an EdD in Educational Leadership?