Stages of group development have been defined as forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman, 1965, 1977). This widely accepted model serves as the framework for this paper about the group development phases experienced by students participating in a cohort-based doctoral program. Because learning in a classroom setting is “as much a socially shared undertaking as it is an individually constructed enterprise” (Lambert & McCombs, 1998, p. 39), learning environments are affected by social interactions, interpersonal relationships, and communication styles among those present. Tensions over power relationships within classrooms can develop when the environment is exclusively controlled or micro-managed by an instructor. Because such tensions can impede learning for adults, educators should transfer the responsibility for controlling the learning environment to the adult learners (Geltner, 1994; Rogers, 2003; Tough, 1999). Adult learners thus assume responsibility for ensuring that their peers feel at ease, for managing the learning space to support their comfort, and for committing personally to individual and collective learning goals (Hiemstra, 1991).

Transformative Group Development

The first stage of group development—forming—involves the introduction of group members exploring acceptable group behavior and the evolution of individuals to group status (Tuckman, 1965). Group members often experience a variety of emotions during the formation stage. These include pride in being chosen for the group, anticipation, and anxiety about the tasks and how these will be accomplished (Quinn, Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1998).

Frequently, the second stage of group development—storming—is the most difficult period for the group. Individual group members often have strong opinions as to how the group should function and thus bring personal agendas to the community. Group members are confronted with the realization that the tasks to be undertaken are different and sometimes more difficult than they had anticipated. During this storming phase, individuals within the group often depend on their own professional and personal experiences rather than collaborative efforts by the group. There tends to be a strong level of resistance to collaboration that results in anxiety and conflict (Tuckman, 1965; Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991).

The tendency towards arguments, defensiveness, and competition within the group gives way to more productive behaviors during the third stage in a group’s development—norming. The group becomes more cohesive as members recognize and adhere to group-developed norms and rules and assume the roles and responsibilities required for members. This norming process results in a decrease in conflict and competition within the group. The group tends to embrace a focus found within consensus, and group enthusiasm is often high. Behavior often exhibited within the group during the norming stage includes an increased ability to accept constructive criticism and recognition of the need to establish and maintain group boundaries (Tuckman, 1965). Group members experience an increase in collegial relationships and a decrease in conflicts (Quinn, Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1998).

The performing stage of group development is characterized by the group’s increased capacity for problem solving and implementation of changes that lead to task accomplishment. The relationships...
within the group are stable and group members tend to understand and focus on expectations (Tuckman, 1965). The performing stage of group development is characterized by group members accepting and understanding strengths and weaknesses of other members. The group is able to work through barriers and members exhibit a close sense of identification with the group (Quinn, Anderson, & Finklestein, 1998).

Generally, the last stage—adjourning—brings closure to a group by the ending of a process, assignment, or other task (Tuckman, 1965). Group members feel relatively elated that an achievement has been made and most have strong feelings about the group experience, whether negative or positive. In reflection the group is able to see what they have accomplished and some group members may even experience a sense of loss (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The adjournment phase for the cohort will occur with the completion of the EdD.

**Collective Learning**

A learner-centered approach to adult education requires adult learners to accept responsibility for “their own development through self-managed learning” and be “actively involved in the development of their classmates” (Foreman & Johnston, 1999, p. 377). Collective responsibility transforms a loosely coupled group of students into a community of learners. Working as collegial partners, members of learning communities are more likely to embrace risk due to a sense of community and safety (Senge, 1990). Collective learning emerges when group identity is formed through revelation and understanding of and respect for individual differences. Resulting group norms support open dialogue and discussion about diverse topics, often including many of the “nondiscussables” (Barth, 2001, p. 9) in educational circles, and creates a framework in which conflicts can be resolved effectively. Furthermore, groups that have worked through differences and became self-regulated develop into highly functioning teams.

**Divergent Paths to the Doctoral Program**

Educational and career aspirations can lead people from many different backgrounds, institutions, and communities down a convergent path towards the doctoral degree. This journey can spawn, both consciously and unconsciously, the fear of the unknown for each individual in the new learning community created at the launch of a new doctoral program. As strangers, members of this newly formed group are forced to grow beyond their comfort zones and current support networks to embrace the goal of lifelong learning. A new system of support that integrates collaboration, co-dependence, and shared learning was introduced to us as participants in a unique EdD program for employees of a statewide system of community and technical colleges.

The intent of this University of Kentucky (UK) leadership program is “to prepare a group of thoughtful, focused, and creative individuals for key administrative and leadership posts in Kentucky’s two-year institutions” (http://www.uky.edu/Education/EPE/KCTCS.html). As we progressed through the program, we have developed new support systems that include colleagues from across the state as well as UK faculty and staff. For many, the pedagogical methods used for teaching and learning were as strange to us as the new faces of our classmates. But above all, the different roads and paths that led us to the doctoral program enriched the overall experience and enhanced learning within the community.

One member’s path to the program was sometimes straight, but more often sideways. His educational endeavor began after completing high school in rural eastern Kentucky, then attending Morehead State University on a football scholarship with no concrete plans beyond that point. Another member
graduated from Morehead State University with a BS and MS in Biology with a specific purpose and goal: to find a job in research and do that for the rest of his life. A third member’s path began as a graduate teaching assistant in the Department of Political Science at the University of Southern Mississippi. The last member of this group graduated from Eastern Kentucky University with a BBA in Computer Information System and completed an MS in Computing Technology and Education through Nova Southeastern University’s long-distance learning program. She has always had aspirations to make a difference in the lives of others. The diversity of talent among our group raised awareness and concerns of all members about how we would progress towards successful EdD degree attainment. Each of us would go through all of the stages of group development.

Through this paper, we present our collective reflection about the group-development stages our cohort experienced during its first two years of progress through a four-year EdD program. We discuss internal and external events that required us to repeat the stages of group development and redefine group norms to achieve a high performance level.

**Theory-Practice Connection: Reflections of Our Experiences**

The challenges involved in the rigorous task of pursuing a doctorate frequently result in significant stress and anxiety (Miller & Irby, 1999), often translating into a high rate of failure (Jeavons, 1993). One method of motivating students and decreasing stress levels is to implement a cohort-based learning community. Commitment to the group and a significant level of interdependence among group members increases the likelihood that individuals will complete their educational programs (Dorn & Papalewis, 1997). The key to the successful use of cohorts is guiding the development of the group into an effective learning community (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2008).

Educational cohorts begin their programs as a group of strangers who share a common goal: completing a program of study. The power of groups has been demonstrated in diverse disciplines, such as group psychotherapy, self-help, business, and education, and all are dependent on the transition through group development stages. Successful groups develop a high level of respect and trust among group members and a level of support and commitment that lead to the development of knowledge, effective decision making, positive change, and strong problem solving efforts (Lawrence, 2002).

Educational cohorts in traditional programs rely on face-to-face interactions to develop the essential group relationships. Recent trends that use technology to blend traditional educational modalities with Web-based modalities present new challenges to group development (Engstrom, Santo, & Yost, 2008). The challenges of using the online environment in the development of a learning community involve an even greater commitment from the group members who must develop social relationships, develop technical skill, and share a sense of purpose in non-traditional ways (Conrad, 2005).

**Stage One of Group Development: Forming**

The forming state is characterized by feelings of uncertainty, awkwardness, and anxiety as “group members struggle to find their place in the group, and their primary feeling is one of uncertainty and anxiety” (Fall & Wejnert, 2005, p. 315). For many individuals, the interactive and co-dependent design of assignment completion and group learning was the first real experience many participants had in building a community that functions at a high level. This is typical in development of teams as individuals tend to express their opinions more freely as individuals get more comfortable with one another and
attempt to gain influence with other members of the team (Smith, 2001b; Tuckman, 1965; Worchel, 1994).

Many of us had been involved in some form of team development at work through supervisory responsibilities and activities such as curriculum development and system committee work. Curriculum development teams at our colleges often are comprised of members in the same discipline who create or edit curriculum to meet the needs of students. Such teams are formed by system members, and a chair is elected by his or her peers. Committees formed by the system office are given specific tasks, and provided a deadline to complete assigned task. In either setting, group members quickly delineate assignments, broker for influence, and communicate on the project updates. The final product is typically no more than a collection of independently completed work.

When we first formed into small groups within our doctoral cohort, several of us realized that someone had to take charge and manage the groups in order to get anything done. Since I have worked in diverse groups at my college and at the system office, I gravitated to that role. I assumed that all members of the small groups had strengths and a desire to achieve at a high level. All they needed was a leader to guide the projects along. The thing I did not realize was that my cohort peers thought they should be the leader in charge, which made for some interesting group dynamics during the early months of the program.

Our first groups were formed by program faculty and given a specific charge with some group-building exercises added to the assignment. We worked out systems of contacting each other, drafted a set of norms, and tried to set deadlines and responsibilities. We thought, however, that the point of the exercise was to get the job done, thus not understanding the real intent was to engage us in the group-forming process. Many cohort members viewed the program and team exercises as a major shift from our typical roles and individual experiences. In the past, most of us would work in a team only if the instructors made us. Nonetheless, we could function well in a team regardless of what role was required for each of us to assume.

We struggled with understanding the value in group development and team building, since ultimately the achievement of this degree would be personal and individual. However, the ideas and biases that were brought into the groups, as well as the personalities and attitudes of each member had not been tested. In addition, some members just did not get along with others, had contrary views and perspectives, or were simply abrupt, which headed the group toward a storm like they had never seen.

**Stage Two of Group Development: Storming**

The storming stage involves changes in both the relationships among the group members and new roles for the faculty. Program faculty moved from being primary directors of cohort sessions to assuming roles as facilitators and coaches. Cohort members began to develop personal relationships with peers while exploring the educational ideologies of individual members (Tuckman, 1965). The tension within the groups during the storming process led to further development and enrichment within the cohort. The diversity in backgrounds and professional experiences was a major storming point. Some members with backgrounds in technical fields felt compelled to defend their experiences to those with more traditional, academic experiences. This tension was evident in virtually all discussions, both online and face-to-face, during the storming phase.
Acute awareness of this tension often altered discussion responses and stymied presentation of alternative perspectives in order to reduce conflict, although the areas of discussion that produced the most controversy did result in significant learning experiences and growth for us. Because one cohort member had extensive experience in working with groups as a social work professor, she assumed a supportive role for group members who had diverse opinions. This forced us to think outside of our deeply held opinions and move to a broader framework of reference in various academic areas. At the same time, this allowed us to appreciate and value others ideas and perceptions instead of keeping a one-minded opinion.

**Stage Three of Group Development: Norming**

The norming stage for our cohort and subgroups assigned for class projects generally became easier as time went on. The process of norming is designed to provide a means for groups to create processes for resolving issues, increasing production, and setting up policy and procedures for interaction (Tuckman, 1965). This process was advanced when a professor suggested we create a set of simple rules—norms—for each group. Our norms quickly became a standardized means of operating that identified who does what, how it is done, and when it is completed. For example, one assignment was a research paper that required multiple tasks to complete in a specific order. Our professor required us to identify each task, assign those responsible for each task, articulate how we would communicate and handle disagreements, and specify the exact due dates for each task.

This example of a norming process provided a guide for us. When group assignments were given, each newly formed group typically created a set of rules and procedures that everyone could accept and a contract to keep on task. This worked well, although individuals often had to edit the procedures a little to make adjustments due to external demands. Norms for the cohort provided members with a sense of cohesion, an important component of being a group (Tuckman, 1965). Individuals focused on the tasks at hand and relied on their peers to complete their assigned tasks, which in turn strengthened the groups’ dynamic bonds. Animosities toward other members began to fade, and high-performing teams emerged. We perceive the norming process made us respect and trust each other and develop strong friendships. The process of norming ended our apprehensions about working collaboratively and allowed for bonding to take place. Norming transformed the learning environment into a think-tank atmosphere where everyone held an even status.

**Stage Four of Group Development: Performing**

As the cohort advanced, performing became a process that required simple thought and action. What were originally hard and complicated became simplistic exercises. The cohort was guided by the incredible patience of two UK professors who attended to the need for us to experience the differences in random group member assignments and purposeful selections on various projects. Reflecting back to the first semester, we think that the random selections were initially used to explore how different groups would interact on projects. Membership was usually kept to five to eight members where interactions seemed to move faster. Over time more selective groupings based on individuals’ strengths or position were used to advance our growth.

Given that retrospective analysis will most likely show some level of increased performance abilities of the cohort as a whole, this particular cohort also appeared to grow as individuals. Our focus was most definitely the functions of community and technical colleges, yet our knowledge and understanding of higher education in general and education leadership in particular was greatly increased.
Often individuals in the cohort would comment that they suddenly understood a concept or made some connection that they never noticed prior to the formation of the cohort. It is this growth in understanding that has made our cohort so successful. Through our sharing of ideas, communicating via multiple media, expressing multiple viewpoints, and living the experiences of community learning, we gained the ability to function at levels that were far higher than they had previously attained.

The diverse makeup of the cohort also provided many influences that were key contributors in the success of this cohort. Faculty members from multiple disciplines ranging from Information Technology to English Literature were grouped with system office employees responsible for grant writing and library services. Administration officials at various colleges were added to the mix to give completeness to the group. Cohort members were also picked from various locations within the statewide system that serves diverse communities, which added local cultural and economic richness to our discussions.

**Other Cohort Perceptions**

To gain perceptions about the cohort experience among all participants, we administered an anonymous Web-based survey during September 2009 using Survey Tracker. The survey included a mix of open-response and choice-selection questions. All but one of our cohort peers responded to the survey. Based on responses to demographics questions, the respondents included 12 females and 9 males. Fifteen reported they were native-born Kentuckians. Responses to a question about race and ethnicity indicates the following diversity of the cohort: 18 Caucasian, 1 African American, 1 Native American, and 1 Other. Although the majority of the cohort members ranged in age from 41-50, 3 members are in their 30s and 2 are in their 50s.

Eleven cohort members began working at colleges within the statewide system more than 10 years ago. Two cohort members have been employed in system-affiliated colleges for over 20 years, while the other 10 have been hired since 2000. Only 4 of the 21 cohort members are full-time faculty members teaching a load of 15 credit hours or more per semester. Fourteen of 21 cohort members were already in a leadership position when they started the program and 8 members have changed positions within their institution since beginning the program in 2007.

Cohort members were asked what specifically prompted them to apply to the program. Cohort responses can be categorized into three main areas: program format, professional advancement, and cost. Nineteen of the 21 respondents indicated that tuition waivers did contribute or influence their decision to enter this UK doctoral program.

Although only 4 of the current cohort members had participated in a cohort-based program prior to this one, 20 reported that they would choose to participate in a cohort environment again based on their experience in this UK cohort program. Thirteen members felt that learning in a cohort environment has changed their perception of group work and cohorts.

During the first semester, cohort members were required to complete the *StrengthFinders* assessment (Rath, 2007), a Web-based assessment created by Gallup Corporation that indicates the top five strengths of the individual. During the second semester, a cohort instructor used the strengths identified for each cohort member to create groups for class assignments. Cohort members responded in a basic split concerning the effectiveness of using *StrengthFinders* results as a tool for developing groups. Additionally, 15 members expressed specific advantages and disadvantages to instructor-selected
groups versus self-selected groups. Cohort members were also asked to describe the most difficult part of forming teams and completing groupwork. Responses were inconsistent, ranging from not knowing each other and working across distances to laziness of some group members, limited timeframe for completing assignments, and agreeing on norms.

Members were also asked about the most satisfying experience of working in a group: The most common responses were solid relationships that had been formed through collaboration, learning about new technologies for communicating at a distance, seeing team members grow, and successfully completing assigned tasks, assignments, and comprehensive examination. Seventeen cohort members felt the experience of working in groups was positive; the other four cohort members did not respond to the question. Eighteen of the 21 cohort members felt the cohort experience and UK program generally has allowed them to expand their knowledge of the statewide community and technical college system.

The final question on the survey asked the cohort member about which of the group development stages (i.e., forming storming, norming, performing) they felt were the most difficult. Eleven cohort members indicated that the storming stage was the most difficult for them. Other responses included forming (n=5), norming (n=4), and performing (n=1). Our survey did not ask respondents to explain the reasons for their selected answer.

Closing Thoughts

The value of cohorts, along with the multitude of ways that educators and learners can benefit from them, suggests implications for both the design of cohorts and the use of cohorts. Since cohort members gain value from the cohort experience in multiple ways and at different stages, active learning in a collaborative environment can be viewed as its fundamental influence and therefore warrants more study. The pedagogy of active learning used in the UK program allows for more than educational attainment—it created an environment within which adult learners work and function as a multi-skilled group with an array of skills and abilities that over time complement each other. We perceive that cohorts can be adapted to programs at all levels of the education spectrum, such as postsecondary developmental education and technical-oriented programs of study. Participants in such programs can benefit from the trusting relationships attained in a properly designed cohort.

Experiences gained from participating in a cohort can be both challenging and rewarding. Each member of our cohort had to become an active participant in their learning. With faculty serving as guides, we were forced to assume collective responsibility for our learning. Being placed outside our comfort zones helped us to learn each other’s strengths and limitations, while appreciating the value of differing backgrounds, perspectives, and positions on institutional topics. New relationship bridges were built, thus laying the foundation for respect and trust among the cohort members and building a network of colleagues from across the state. While the goal of this EdD program is to prepare cohort members for leadership positions specifically at the two-year’s colleges, the knowledge gained from the cohort experience reaches far beyond the goals of the program by bringing strangers together to form perfect partners.

Although six cohort members withdrew during the first year, four due to personal challenges and two due to pedagogical differences, a core of 22 cohort members has remained. Our first year was the roughest because we did know the expectations of faculty or our cohort peers. Once storming subsided and norming became a focus, we became a cohesive group. With each new semester, norming became second nature, which allowed us to move quickly to performing. Presenting our assignments or project
in front of each other is now easier because we value the constructive feedback and questions from our peers and instructors.

Although the path was initially obscured with dust through the forming and storming stages, illumination settled the dust to allow norming and performing to emerge. Even though it is certainly true that each cohort member would have preferred to pick their own teams, it was productive when instructors used different methods for selecting the groups—whether by balancing group membership based on individuals’ strengths, by positions group members hold at their respective institutions, or by simply counting off. The continuous regrouping helped us get to know one another and to develop close relationships. Our cohort provides its members support and encouragement needed to progress us together on our journey toward attaining the EdD degree and thus reaching the final stage of group development—adjourning.

References


Appendix A
UK / KCTCS Cohort: Experiences Survey 2009

1. Were you born in Kentucky? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
2. What is your Gender? [ ] Female [ ] Male
3. What is your Ethnicity? [ ] Caucasian [ ] African American [ ] Native American [ ] Other
4. What was your age at the time of entering the program (select age range)?
   [ ] 21-25 [ ] 36-40 [ ] 51-55
   [ ] 26-30 [ ] 41-45 [ ] 56-60
   [ ] 31-35 [ ] 46-50 [ ] 61 or above
5. What year did you begin in the institution KCTCS (UK/Vo-tech/etc.)? _________
   Are you a full-time classroom educator? (one that teaches 15 or more credit hours per semester) [ ] Yes [ ] No
6. What brought you to the cohort? (What motives, drive, etc.)
7. When you entered the program were you in a leadership position? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
   Since being in the program, has your position changed to a leadership (or different leadership) position? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
8. Have you worked in a cohort before? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
9. Would you choose the cohort method again? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
10. Has this experience changed your perception of group work and/or cohorts? If so, how? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
11. Did the tuition waivers influence your decision to enter the Ed.D. Program? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
12. Did you find using StrengthsFinder (SF) useful? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
13. Do you see specific advantages to instructor selected groups versus self-selected groups? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
14. Do you see specific disadvantages to instructor selected groups versus self-selected groups? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
15. Did you find StrengthFinders a useful tool for developing groups? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
16. What did you find was the most difficult part of forming teams and completing work in the cohort model?
17. What was the most satisfying experience you had working in a group? In the cohort?
18. Was that experience positive or negative? [ ] Yes  [ ] No
19. Have you expanded your knowledge of the KCTCS system? (Mission, Goals, etc.) [ ] Yes  [ ] No
20. What part of initial cohort function did you find most difficult for you personally? [ ] Storming [ ] Forming [ ] Norming [ ] Performing