

Use of Learner-Centered Strategies in the Preparation of Community and Technical College Leaders: Assessments by Participating Doctoral Students

Tricia Browne-Ferrigno and Rodney Muth¹

Doctoral education recently has received considerable attention, particularly by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate spanned five years and engaged representatives from six disciplines at 84 universities across the United States that award the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree. The goal of that project was to restructure PhD programs to better prepare scholars for the 21st century (Golde & Walker, 2006; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008; Wasley, 2007). Another initiative is the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), a three-year collaborative effort among 24 universities offering both the Doctor of Education (EdD) and PhD degrees in education. CPED focuses on “developing *stewards of practice*” (Perry & Imig, 2008, p. 44) through participation in EdD programs uniquely different from traditional PhD preparation (Schulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006).

To achieve the differentiated goals, revitalized EdD programs must evidence changes in scope and sequence of curricula, engage with new knowledge bases and signature pedagogies, and incorporate research methods appropriate for practitioner-scholars (Gutherie, 2009; Loss, 2009; see also Barnett & Muth, 2008). Because such programs are intended for practitioners who are employed full-time (Perry & Imig, 2008), they typically are delivered through executive, cohort-based models that are fast-paced, problem-oriented, and applied. Little attention has been given, however, to new expectations for faculty and students in these redesigned programs. Our proposition is that we should pay significant attention to such matters. Further, our experience and research on practice-based learning indicates that EdD faculty should develop and implement student-centered learning strategies that recognize the essential role of adults in their own learning, that figure importantly in knowledge retention and use, and that engage students who, as a result, are more likely to complete their programs.

This paper presents assessments by students actively engaged in a recently redesigned EdD program, delivered at a research-extensive university participating in the CPED, to prepare leaders for a statewide system of community and technical colleges. Because a unique feature of the program is a required group dissertation, small-group and team-development activities were initiated during the first semester of coursework and continued throughout three subsequent semesters. Assessments of cohort members’ experiences presented in this paper were derived from two sources: (a) Students’ reflections about learning activities and outcomes gathered through post-assignment Web-based surveys and (b) their group-authored papers for a conference in which they described program elements and how those elements impacted their learning. These data sources are complete; member checking of final conference papers, including this one, by doctoral students in the program provides quality assurance.

The next section presents a research overview of learning cohorts and communities of practice as well as learning-centered principles, adult learning theories, and recommended leadership-development practices. Following this review is a description of the EdD program and cohort, followed by the presentation of student assessments. We conclude with implications and recommendations for using student-centered instructional strategies in doctoral education.

¹ Tricia Browne-Ferrigno (tricia.ferrigno@uky.edu) is an associate professor of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky. Rodney Muth is a professor of Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Colorado Denver (rodney.muth@ucdenver.edu). This paper was presented at the October 2010 National Evaluation Institute sponsored by the Consortium for Research on Educational Accountability and Teacher Education, Williamsburg, VA.

From Cohort to Generative Learning Community

Use of closed cohorts in leadership-preparation programs is recommended because the delivery model enhances professional learning and skill development for participants (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Hebert & Reynolds, 1998; Peel, Wallace, Buckner, Wrenn, & Evans, 1998). A closed-cohort structure also provides opportunities for aspiring and experienced leaders to learn and practice skills in group goal setting, community building, conflict resolution, and culture management (Muth, 2000, 2002) and supports implementation of long-term developmental activities and point-counterpoint discussions (Cordiero, Boutiler, Panicek, & Salamone-Consoli, 1993; Guzmán & Muth, 1999) that are difficult to integrate into or across individual courses.

Successful use of closed cohorts, however, depends on the cohorts becoming “generative learning communities” (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2008, p. 78). Closed cohorts functioning as generative learning communities have the same three fundamental elements of communities of practice: “a *domain* of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a *community* of people who care about this domain; and the shared *practice* that they are developing to be effective in their domain” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 27). Communities of practice evolve over time as their members develop expertise through shared learning and knowledge refinement “out of the raw material of [members’] experiences” (Drath & Palus, 1994, p.3). Thus, participation in a community of practice can expand one’s opportunities for professional growth and career advancement through sharing of expertise and development of collegial relationships. Closed cohorts functioning as generative learning communities likewise set the stage for situated-learning opportunities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) in which novices and experts can apply theories to practice and develop needed skills.

Generative learning communities do not simply happen: They are carefully constructed, consciously nurtured over time, and maintained and transformed through collaborative efforts by all involved individuals. Theories on learner-centered instruction and adult learning as well as recommended practices in leadership development provide guidance in transforming closed cohorts into generative learning communities.

Learner-Centered Instruction

The document developed by the Learner-Centered Principles Work Group of the American Psychological Association’s Board of Educational Affairs (1997) presents 14 principles that place the locus of control for learning with individual learners. Although organized according to four broad factors that influence learners and learning—cognitive and metacognitive, motivational and affective, developmental and social, individual differences—the principles are best viewed holistically (i.e., as an organized set), rather than singly. Appropriate for any group of learners, their effective use requires collaborative environments in which students and instructor learn together while addressing problems of practice relevant to learning objectives.

When learner-centered principals are used in postsecondary education, individual characteristics of diverse adult learners (e.g., beliefs, expertise, motivation) and course requirements (e.g., content, assessment) can be addressed simultaneously. The required active, collaborative learning environments support freedom of self-expression and accommodation of individuality. Thus, adult students become personally responsible for fitting their learning to their particular needs (Thompson, Licklider, & Jungst, 2003).

Adult Learning Theories

Adult learners typically have had rich, lifelong experiences that provide contexts for their learning and thus prefer to direct their own learning. They engage in educational activities to improve their knowledge and skills, to learn about ways to address societal issues, and to apply new knowledge immediately and thus prefer problem-centered learning to accomplish these ends (Cross, 1981; Knowles, 1990; Merriam, 2001). To address the diverse expectations of adult learners, learning environments that are accepting, respectful, and supportive of adult students' beliefs, expertise, and needs (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; McCombs, 1991) are most likely to produce learning outcomes that transfer to practice. Further, learner-centered or transformative-learning approaches require students to accept responsibility for "their own development through self-managed learning" and to be "actively involved in the development of their classmates" (Foreman & Johnston, 1999, p. 377). Moreover, problem- or project-based adult-learning programs (Bridges & Hallinger, 1997; Martin, Murphy, & Muth, 1993; Savery & Duffy, 1995; Wolk, 1994) support these principles and processes by helping students focus on applications and change-oriented outcomes.

Recommended Leadership-Development Practices

The intent of leadership preparation is "to produce leaders" (Milstein, 1992, p. 10) having requisite knowledge, dispositions, and skills to lead contemporary organizations competently and effectively. Successful leadership development programs focus on the self-transformation of participants, a process that requires changes in their professional culture (e.g., language, perspectives, and skills) and that alters their conceptual, personal, and educational orientations (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).

Transformative learning requires adult learners to develop new frames of reference encompassing "*habits of mind and a point of view*" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5) that help them become autonomous critical thinkers as they move from novices toward experts. Transformative learning occurs through (a) articulating one's assumptions, (b) critically assessing them through self-reflection and discourse with others, (c) revising one's assumptions to accommodate new perspectives, and (d) behaving in ways congruent with the revised assumptions. Writing a leadership philosophy and articulating one's core values in a concise leadership platform are recognized strategies for developing leaders (Norris, Basom, Yerkes, & Barnett, 1996; Schmitt & Perl, 2007).

Developing new habits of thinking and behaving can also be stimulated by examining *critical life events* experienced by adult learners or by introducing *activating events* intentionally into a learning environment (Cranton, 2002). Reflective writing, group deliberation, and group problem solving that challenge adult learners to analyze or defend their assumptions are examples of activating events and can be used to analyze critical life events and their ramifications for leadership learning (Hansman, 2001).

Preparing Community and Technical College Leaders

Launched in the fall of 2007, the cohort-based EdD program, a hybrid model of online learning activities and monthly face-to-face meetings, is delivered through a partnership between two departments within the university's college of education and the administrative office of the statewide system of community and technical colleges. The curricular content was developed collaboratively by program faculty from the university, representatives of the community and technical college system office, and adjunct faculty with experience in two- and four-year institutions. Five themes (i.e., innovation and change within institutions, community and technical college issues, postsecondary curriculum, effective leadership,

diversity and social justice) framed the program of studies, whereas four major components (i.e., community and technical colleges within the P-20 education landscape, organizational practice, learning and teaching, applied research and decision analysis) guided curriculum development.

Program Curriculum and Learning Events

During the first three years of the program, students completed the required 15 courses with content emphasis spanning from foundations (first year) to organizational leadership and academic practices (second year) to application for practice (third year). Cohort members, course instructors, and the program director met face-to-face five times each fall and spring semester for two consecutive days (i.e., Friday afternoon and evening, Saturday morning and afternoon), typically in meeting rooms at the system headquarters building. One of the five face-to-face sessions each semester was hosted by cohort members at their college. At least once each academic semester, a doctoral seminar was conducted on a Friday night at the university campus so that the distance-learning EdD cohort members could interact with other faculty and full-time PhD doctoral students completing their studies on the university campus.

During the first semester of their program, cohort members attended the 2007 annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education in Louisville, Kentucky, where they had opportunities to meet and talk with leading community-college scholars. During their third year of studies, the students presented group-authored papers at the 2009 annual meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration in Atlanta, Georgia.

Learning Cohort

Due to the program's intentional focus on community and technical colleges, admissions were limited to personnel working at the system office or at one of its 16 member colleges. The original cohort membership of 28 students dropped to 22 by the end of the first year; those withdrawing cited personal, professional, or pedagogical reasons for leaving. The group that completed all coursework included 10 men and 12 women employed as administrators, faculty, and professional staff at 13 of the 16 member institutions as well as the system office. Three of the 22 students opted to complete their dissertations as sole researchers rather than as members of dissertation groups. At this writing, 19 cohort members are finalizing their group and individual study proposals for defense during their qualifying examinations. The research foci of the five self-selected dissertation teams are dual credit through middle college high schools, student experience and progression through community college, online learning, transfer credit, and organizational excellence.

Student Assessments of Learner-Centered Strategies

Throughout the first semester of the program, the cohort was required to participate in Blackboard-discussion activities in which they reviewed and critiqued their peers' reflections about community-college issues. Students were formed first into four and then six different, randomly assigned small groups and required to sit with their group members during face-to-face meetings. They communicated with their peers via group discussion boards in Blackboard to complete two collaboratively developed papers (i.e., an abstract of an assigned research-based article, an outline for a research proposal). After completing these assignments, students then completed a Web-based questionnaire in which they were asked to reflect about their groups' performance with regard to assigned readings about high-performing work teams. Cohort members reported that "the process seemed very disjointed" and that

some groups “never formally assigned specific authority within the group as it pertains to tasks or timetables.” According to one respondent,

Our team never discussed . . . individual accountability. Therefore, no penalties were decided or discussed for those [who] did not complete their respective tasks. This may have been due to [the fact that] formal tasks were not assigned. Overall, our team performance was not satisfactory.

According to the students, these first efforts at collaborative work were challenging because they were accustomed to collaborating in “physical environments,” not virtually across miles and time zones. They “thought in terms of fairly immediate feedback,” rather than “asynchronous discussions in Blackboard,” and thus did not consider “how other team members used technology in responding.” Although many cohort members use Blackboard and other online platforms in their professional practices as community college instructors, they had not experienced the process as learners. Thus, some “lacked the understanding of how to accomplish the task” using information technology.

These early group projects also generated conflict because the small groups failed to articulate group-member responsibilities, share responsibility for completing tasks, or even make efforts to get to know one another. This was troubling to some cohort members, best reflected in this comment:

The first group in which I was assigned was recognized by both group members and observers as spending a great deal of time “storming” . . . I have been a member of many groups in the past, but this was by far the most difficult in which to work. . . . Our team had no management or leadership.

Although most groups “followed instructions” and “produced a great final product,” it became evident to everyone involved in the program that more intentional efforts at group development were needed.

Assuming Responsibility for Individual and Collective Learning

During the second semester, students took the first of a two-course series on leadership in educational organizations. Content focused on multiple organizational realities, first from a contemporary perspective accomplished by viewing organizations through four different frames (Bolman & Deal, 2003), and then from the perspective of classic theories emphasizing rational, natural, and open systems (Scott & Davis, 2006; Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2004). Readings about high-performing teams (Harvard Business School Press, 2006) were integrated into the course curriculum to address group-development needs.

Using students’ StrengthsFinder results (Rath & Conchie, 2008) to develop six teams, the instructor balanced representation across at least three of four leadership domains (executing, influencing, building relationships, thinking strategically). Students remained as intact teams throughout the Spring 2008 semester. Two major assignments were assessed using rubrics that the teams initially drafted and then the cohort developed collaboratively; team members received the same grade based on their team’s overall performance, measured by the cohort-developed rubrics.

The teams’ first task was to work collaboratively to develop norms for completing two group presentations. All decision making about group structure and processes was left to the discretion of each team. The intent of these group-development assignments was for cohort members to learn individually and collectively how to form into and work successfully in high-performing teams (Laiken, 1998)—a skill required for the group dissertation. An online questionnaire administered six weeks after

the semester began yielded student perceptions about this initial team-building assignment. Table 1 presents results of a Likert-type prompt where choices ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

Table 1. *Student Perceptions of Team Building Activity*

Assessment Criterion	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average
Team had clear authority to complete assigned task	0%	0%	12.5%	87.5%	3.88
Team composition was right mix of expertise	0%	0%	45.8%	54.2%	3.54
Team recast task into measurable goals	0%	4.24%	37.5%	58.3%	3.54
Team developed common commitment to working relationships	0%	0%	25%	75%	3.75
Team members held themselves collectively accountable for final product	0%	0%	29.2%	70.8%	3.71
Specific team roles were discussed	0%	8.3%	33.3%	58.3%	3.50
Specific team roles were developed	4.2%	8.3%	29.2%	58.3%	3.42
Team developed structure adaptable to future tasks	0%	4.3%	25%	70.8%	3.67

Commentary generated through open-response prompts on the same post-assignment questionnaire provided further evidence of cohort members assuming greater responsibility for their individual and collective learning. The first prompt asked, *What was the most important lesson you learned by completing this assignment?* Threaded throughout responses are revelations such as “effectiveness can be improved by some thoughtful, intentional discussion before launching out toward goal” and that developing “agreed-upon norms” can add “clarity and conciseness” to the process. One cohort member wrote,

The most important lesson I learned from this assignment was how to start the work of forming a team. I have developed team norms before both as a team member and team leader, but starting the process from the beginning without predefined roles was something new for me. I think it is always good to “experience” the process. It is one thing to read about a concept, but to actually be forced to engage with the process takes it to a whole new learning experience.

A peer reported using “the experience and the reading to form other teams at work” and changing “some ways that I engage others” as a result of the class activity. Another cohort member wrote,

This was an excellent assignment as it required our group to discuss some ground rules and guidelines. The activity itself opened up lines of communication which is crucial in any group activity, particularly one in which most of the interaction is done via technology. That was a very important thing to do for group cohesion and development. While we all agreed upon specific ground rules, it will be very interesting to see how we as a group and as individuals deal with any conflict that might occur. The important thing is for everyone (including myself) to be aware that we may not agree on all aspects of what we are doing as a group and that is okay. As long as we are open and respectful in our communication, we will be a productive group.

The other open-response prompt on the questionnaire asked, *If your identity was not disclosed to your fellow teammates, what concern(s) would you share with them?* Although most responses suggested a sense of shared responsibility for learning among the cohort, some interesting thinking emerged in students' comments. For example,

My biggest concern is my sense of personal responsibility. What I do impacts not just my grade but potentially that of others. . . . As a team member, I have a responsibility to others that I would actually prefer not to have. As adult professionals, we are more likely to take our class work responsibilities to heart (unlike some first-semester freshman students, for example). Therefore, a sense of collective accountability may be viewed as already built into the teams because of the very nature and make up of the class.

Differences in orientation to completing the assigned task (e.g., process versus product) appeared in the responses: "compromise is not always a bad thing" and "there are problems with moving too quickly and thinking too little." One cohort member wrote, "I think we were a little more concerned with expediency than the actual content of our product. We probably should have spent a little more time getting to know one another and discussing strengths and weaknesses." Another student asserted that "one day I may have to have a 'come to Jesus' with someone who is not performing or carrying out their share of the work load." A peer asserted a preference to address "concerns in an open format."

During the face-to-face cohort meeting immediately following administration of this questionnaire, a copy of the results was distributed to each cohort member. Time was allocated for teams to review and discuss together the anonymous results. Several teams reviewed and modified their group norms to address concerns that became evident in questionnaire responses and team conversations. According to several cohort members, this activity—intended to build capacity for the cohort to complete group dissertations—made it evident to two women that the program was not appropriate for them. They did not enjoy working collaboratively on class projects or course assignments and thus withdrew from the program the following week.

Preparing for the Group Dissertation

By the beginning of the Spring 2009 semester, cohort members had independently drafted two research proposals and written several literature reviews on community college readings. The two course instructors that semester determined that it was time for the cohort to work in teams to design and conduct an authentic pilot study as practice for the required group dissertation. Students formed into five self-selected teams composed of three to four members each. The only requirements for the pilot study were that (a) the research topic would relate to student services in community colleges, (b) the Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) (Beebe, 2001) would be utilized for data collection and analysis, and (c) each team would present study findings during the last face-to-face cohort meeting of the semester (April 24-25). The deadline for submission of the final pilot-study report was May 2, which gave students time to make needed revisions and complete careful editing prior to submitting the report.

An online questionnaire about the pilot study was administered immediately after the deadline for submission of the study report. The first 20 questions were about the teams' inquiry projects, particularly distribution of responsibilities for organizing the project, data collection, data analysis, writing report, editing report, and preparing PowerPoint slides used in the formal presentation. The discussion that follows is based on responses to the open-response prompt that asked, *What important lesson(s) did you learn about working as an inquiry team?*

Because the pilot study was the first disciplined-inquiry project conducted by some cohort members, their comments reflected their perceptions that research “is hard work,” that it “takes a lot of planning to get everything going well,” and that “more thought needs to go into the question and entire protocol process.” Apparently, one was surprised that “qualitative analysis is very rewarding,” while another was pleased that “information could be gathered quickly using RAP.” A particular cohort member learned the importance of planning ahead:

Setting norms and a timeline for components of the projects are crucial in setting precedence from beginning to the end of the project. Lastly, to have backup plans because things do not always happen the way it is initially planned.

A peer likewise commented on the importance of planning:

We did a lot of storming, and that cost us at least a week, placing greater pressure on time later in the project. I learned that a storming team can also be productive and work together professionally despite differences in style and, to some extent, ethos. I also learned the importance of having agreements in advance on what the responsibilities are, and having norms in place to handle times when team members cannot meet their deadlines.

The “need for carefully coordinated schedules with clearly identified responsibilities and expectations for each team member” was another lesson learned.

Conducting the team-based pilot study appeared to generate confidence in some cohort members about their ability to complete successfully the required group dissertation, as this cohort member remarked:

I think the biggest lesson for me was to see everything from two years come together in a better understanding of what would occur during an actual research report. I was able to work with some members that I use to have reservations about.

A peer reported a similar perspective: “If this experience is anything like the group dissertation, it will be an incredible experience. I thoroughly enjoyed the process and the team. Each of us brought a totally different perspective which provided a richer analysis.”

The last prompt on the questionnaire asked, *Based on your recent experience as a member of an inquiry team, what are your thoughts about the group dissertation proposed for the cohort?* Twenty of the 22 responses reflected an overall positive perspective about the group dissertation, evidenced by phrases such as “will do a great job together” and “more family now than coworker” relative to working together. One cohort member asserted that team members “are critical to a successful group dissertation. They must all work equally hard, be responsible and reliable, and get along with each other!” Another noted the following: “working together well is almost as important as choosing a topic that is important to the researcher.”

The issue of team-member selection or composition appeared in 9 of the 22 responses. Two lengthy comments express the overall concerns of the cohort, in this case the process for team-member selection.

One concern that I have is that I have not had the opportunity to work with everyone in the cohort on a team project. I know everyone well enough, but unless you have experienced a

team project with someone, you really don't know how well you would work together. I think we should be able to select our own teams, perhaps within reason. I don't want this to turn into a "Survivor" episode, where people are making deals, etc. If we are all to move forward, I think we should develop an open and transparent process for teams to be formed. I still think the group dissertation is a unique aspect of this program and one in which I look forward to.

Another comment articulates the importance of team cohesion to assure successful completion of the required dissertation.

I think the group dissertation will allow a more thorough study of an issue with multiple aspects being researched that are all intertwined and related back to the issue. . . .The team for the dissertation has to be the right fit with members for it to be the most successful it can be. The members of the team [have] to be able to work with, depend on, and rely on each other.

Some cohort members, nonetheless, remained skeptical about the group dissertation. Their collective concern was best articulated in this student's comment: "I would expect that the experiences as a member of an inquiry team will be invaluable in crafting a group dissertation, but I still worry about crafting such a high-stakes document like a dissertation as a group project."

The program director was informed of the cohort's concerns about team-member selection. She administered a survey that asked students to identify possible dissertation topics and team collaborators and then used results to create possible teams. Prior to announcing the teams, she contacted each cohort member personally about the proposed assignments. After adjustments were made to address student requests, the dissertation teams were announced, and dissertation chairs and advisory team members were appointed. All five teams received initial approval for their group studies in May 2010. Scheduling of qualifying examinations (e.g., formal proposal defenses of individual and group proposals) is currently in progress.

Becoming a Generative Learning Community

During the Fall 2009 semester, students presented four group-authored papers about their experiences as members of an EdD cohort at a regional conference. Topics included an overall assessment of the program elements, stages of group development experienced by the cohort, how they balanced personal and professional responsibilities, and application of learning to leadership practice. Two groups conducted surveys to complete their papers; the two others reviewed course-produced documents and presented authors' professional reflections. The quoted material in this section is from those group-authored conference papers.

Persistence through peer support. Adult students often experience major personal or professional events that can impact their continuation in graduate studies (e.g., birth of children or grandchildren, illness or death of loved one, marriage or divorce, professional promotion or new assignment, changes in work environment). Although two-thirds of the cohort members experienced such events, it appears that those changes actually strengthened the cohort.

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. (Decker, Dykes, Gilliam, & Marrs, 2009, p. 7)

Although group-development activities were integrated into the curriculum, the relationship building needed to create a “culture of group survival” may have resulted from a more formal program-design element—monthly two-day meetings that required most cohort members to travel significant distances to attend.

Because we are away from families, friends, and work environments during face-to-face sessions, we are able to reconnect with our cohort peers in ways that are not possible in traditional doctoral programs delivered through weekly on-campus classes. Through this relationship building, cohort members have begun to care about one another. . . . The support and care shown members [during challenging-life events] have been touching to watch and experience. (Berry, Blankenship, Bolt, & Phillips, 2009, p. 6)

Perhaps most important from the perspective of student persistence in the program is the fact that the cohort “created such a supportive environment that many members who were inclined to withdraw remained [with the cohort] after conferring with other cohort members and faculty” (Berry et al., p. 14). This statement aligns with research conducted by Decker and colleagues: “Most respondents identified support, encouragement, and feelings of value from their other cohort members as reasons for survival” (p. 6).

Adoption of learner-centered strategies. Transforming the culture into a generative learning community required considerable relationship building, particularly during the early months of the program when cohort members experienced repeated cycles of forming and storming among themselves.

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. (Burke, Preston, Quillen, Roe, & Strong, 2009, p. 4)

The shift in expectations for learners frustrated many cohort members and fueled additional conflict in some instances. Rather than serve as mediators, instructors required students to resolve differences among themselves. Fortunately,

one cohort member had extensive experience in working with groups as a social work professor [and] 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 . . . [which] allowed us to appreciate and value others’ ideas and perceptions instead of keeping a one-minded opinion. (Burke et al., p. 5)

Another shift in expectations for these adult learners was their requirement to serve as critical friends to their peers. To develop this skill, they reviewed course papers, online discussion postings, and class assignments and provided feedback.

When the program began, feedback was more polite and less constructive in nature. As the program has continued and the cohort evolves, peer review and feedback that is more constructive, assertive and useful has emerged and proved to be invaluable in our individual and collective learning. . . . As a result, more complex and meaningful discussion has occurred that promotes an environment of learning and growth. (Berry et al., 2009, p. 7)

Over time, students realized that “each member of the cohort had to become an active participant in [her or his] learning” and “assume collective responsibility for our learning” (Burke et al., p. 7). Further evidence of cohort members’ adoption of learner-center strategies is that some “are teaching hybrid classes, using technology to design group projects in their courses, and utilizing their better understanding of student-centered learning in their classrooms” (Berry et al., p. 15)

Transformative learning. Professional reflection was required in all courses, most often through online postings or in-class comments. The major writing assignment in the first leadership course, however, required students to reflect critically about an organizational event or situation that was significant or challenging for them personally and that related to their current practice as an employee within a community or technical college. They had to describe what happened and then analyze the case using Bolman and Deal’s (2003) four organizational frames. This assignment was particularly enlightening—and challenging—for five women in the cohort who had been promoted to administrative positions at their colleges “with limited or no leadership training” (Hlinka, Mayo, Mobelini, Stephenson, & Young, 2009, p. 1). Their conference paper presents summaries of their cases and closes with this reflection.

The case study reflections exemplify our common experiences of having had blinders removed. As a result of our doctoral studies (e.g., pilot studies, readings, shared experiences), each of us has become more aware and appreciative of the subtle impact individuals have on an organization. . . . it is fascinating to sit in a meeting and watch an event unfold while recognizing the underlying agenda, personality or leadership style of others. Readings and reflective writings about our experiences have greatly increased our level of awareness. . . . Reflective thinking is the basis for transformative learning, which requires the adoption of new frames of reference that become habitual and intuitive perspectives for analyzing dilemmas, developing alternative solutions, and choosing the best option. (p. 14)

Discussion and Implications

As the projects and studies cited at the outset indicate, doctoral education in some institutions is in the midst of significant transformation. The program featured here shows clear pathways to success in making the kinds of sometimes radical changes warranted and preferred. The evidence, albeit at this time from a single case, adds importantly to the data about the impact of thoughtful program changes on student-learning outcomes, students’ roles in their own learning, and the roles of faculty as they move from traditional to student-centered, problem-oriented instructional paradigms (cf. Muth, 2002).

Focusing on Student-Centered Learning Outcomes

The history of most student experiences in college, in graduate school, and in professional development is rife with “sit and git” (Lambert, 1998) and “sage on the stage” (Cifuentes, 1997) teaching strategies. Such formats for knowledge dissemination fall seriously short of engaging students in developing, assessing, and growing their own knowledge and professional skills, particularly those needed to accomplish tasks successfully in their professional practices.

According to the students in this study, the program design had the intended effects, both building active engagement in generative learning communities and developing individual and group confidence about their research readiness. For example, in response to a survey prompt asking if the program needed to be changed to improve opportunities for learning, a cohort member wrote,

I appreciate the effort to tie assignments to our jobs and daily lives, making the material and work as relevant as possible. I am a hands-one learner, so when I am able to apply the material, I am better able to retain it.

Another asserted,

The program is evolving in good ways . . . assignments are amazing for their clarity of objectives, quality of evaluation, and integration of the total class experience and content. None of my grad school profs [in the past] were that engaged, and I feel cheated by that.

This cohort comprised of full-time employed practitioners often struggled to balance doctoral studies with professional and personal responsibilities. Thus, faculty adjusted their expectations as noted in this survey response by a student:

I appreciate your willingness to give us a week plus the weekends to complete assignments. It has been a real challenge to put in the time and effort needed to do well in the class and still be effective with a (very) full-time career.

Another student appreciated “the adaptations and the flexibility that you have already provided to us” and asked “that this continues if needed.”

Further, students reported that they were enabled to develop the group processes necessary to support their group-dissertation studies. Recall that the two instructors during the Spring 2009 semester designed a pilot study that served as the major assignment for both courses. After the close of the semester, an anonymous survey was administered to students in which they were asked to reflect about their preparation for completing a group dissertation. Student commentary evidences the added value of using learner-centered strategies and authentic projects. For example, a student reported learning that

You have to understand the strengths of your team members and use those to work smarter and more efficiently. Working as a team can be difficult, especially when everyone has outside professional and personal responsibilities. The scheduling itself can be a huge challenge . . . [but] the advantages outweigh the challenges.

Another cohort member appreciated that team peers “brought completely different expertise and skills” that contributed to their collective success in completing the pilot study. Further, the group “established team norms” that assured “everyone met deadlines and responsibilities.” These learning outcomes resulted not only from intentional efforts by faculty to create authentic experiences that transferred responsibility for success to students, but also from efforts by students who accepted responsibility, both individual and collective, to complete the assigned tasks.

Helping Students Assume Responsibility for Learning

When students experience the freedom and empowerment that come with assuming responsibility for their and their colleagues' learning, their sense of empowerment is palpable. Recall the words in a cohort member's survey response about debriefing the outcome of a group project during the early weeks of the second semester of the program. The assignment "required our group to discuss some ground rules and guidelines. The activity itself opened up lines of communication, which is critical in any group activity, particularly one in which most of the interaction is done via technology."

To get to this point, however, requires that faculty energetically agree to create rich learning environments that encourage and support students taking charge of their own learning and becoming responsible for group developed outcomes. Accomplishing this, however, is not an easy task. Only a few professors in the two departments delivering this EdD program were willing to engage in collaborative curriculum development and ongoing adaptation of that curriculum to address student-learning needs, to conduct classes at off-campus locations or on weekends, or to modify their instruction for delivery via online venues. Such tasks require veteran professors to relinquish considerable autonomy as instructors and often develop the new skills required for distance learning. Further, helping students assume responsibility for their own learning in turn requires faculty to assume the important responsibility of assessment for learning—typically the development tasks, assignments, and rubrics and the monitoring of student responses to learning outcomes. These critically important formative assessments both help direct learning and provide reliable, useful, and timely feedback to learners. They also require instructors willing to make necessary modifications to address learner needs.

Building Readiness for Collaborative Projects

Table 2 below shows examples of what faculty and students might do preparatory to creating self-organizing dissertation teams. If students are expected to work together toward common goals, then given how students typically have learned (i.e., individually, competitively), new skills may need to be developed to support collective, collaborative work. That responsibility falls directly to faculty to create the environments, the learning opportunities and activities, and the expectations that initiate and support collaborative cultures, generative learning, and the skill building essential to accomplishing effective group research as noted in Table 2. For other examples of roles and responsibilities in adult learning and professional preparation, see Muth (2000, 2002) and Muth et al. (2001).

Table 2. *An Example of Faculty and Student Developmental Responsibilities*

Developmental Elements	Faculty Responsibilities	Student Responsibilities
Building Relationships	Establish successively complex, small-group, skill-building exercises	Assess interpersonal skills Engage actively with peers Strengthen group skills
Building Teams	Generate exercises that necessitate interdependent work	Engage actively with peers Provide peer support Assess self and group outcomes
Solving Problems	Create ill-defined research problems that require collaborative group work	Collaborate and assist peers Develop problem-solving skills Assess self and group outcomes

To reach the end-point knowledge and skills necessary to build effective research teams, careful scaffolding is required. Thus, over time, knowledge and skill blocks need to be developed that lead to preferred learning outcomes. Effective research teams, for instance, work collaboratively, accept individual responsibility for group outcomes, and provide timely evaluative feedback such that team members can stay on task, on track, and make corrections in processes as needed. Each of these elements can be developed in successively more complex tasks as has been outlined here. Yet, because such building blocks come together over time and not in one semester, intense collaboration among faculty within and across courses is essential.

Recommendations

In addition to the implications for doctoral programming and outcomes for both EdDs and PhDs, we conclude with several recommendations that can be applied across the board in higher education, including non-threatening ways to engage faculties in significant role changes that help them.

Recommendation 1

Faculty must learn to collaborate with one another to model the very behaviors that they expect of students. Whether this begins with their own research practices, developing a new program or revising an old one, the same performance expectations that they should hold for themselves and their faculty colleagues can form the bases for the learning opportunities built into the program. Effective grant writing and related research and development activities provide excellent models for end-in-view performance expectations for students preparing for group dissertations. Building schedules and cultures that lead to successful faculty research projects are useful prototypes for student-faculty teams to emulate.

Recommendation 2

Not all students can work effectively collaboratively as the outliers in this case demonstrate. Faculty should decide if this is acceptable. If not, then criteria for the recruitment of students needs to be developed so that the probability is increased that every program participant can and will actively and successfully engage in collaborative group research leading to credible and useful dissertations.

Recommendation 3

One way to increase the likelihood that a program like this one will work is to develop strong, mutually supportive university-field partnerships. By building strong relations with area, regional, or statewide constituents, a program builds in practice sites that can provide complex problems of practice on which group dissertations can focus. Alternatively, requests for proposal or adopted partners can supply the problems of practice needed for group research so that problem solutions are meaningful, useful, and productive for field partners as well as relevant for the researchers involved.

The Future

Based on what we have learned from this case, we expect to launch a companion study at another institution that may be completed in 2011. We hope, particularly in light of today's national focus on program assessment and improvement, that other institutions might join these efforts toward increasing research transitions to practice applications to strengthen programmatic outcomes nationally. Additionally, the Carnegie initiatives around the PhD and now the EdD supply the impetus,

legitimacy—if not the demand—for existing EdD programs to take stock and ask what they need to do and what support they need. For those planning to develop EdD programs, a growing network of developers and researchers might provide the kinds of support needed to get sound programs off the ground quickly and well.

References

- Barnett, B. G., Basom, M. R., Yerkes, D. M., & Norris, C. J. (2000). Cohorts in educational leadership programs: Benefits, difficulties, and the potential for developing school leaders. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 36, 255–282.
- Barnett, B. G., & Muth, R. (2008). Using action research strategies and cohort structures to ensure research competence for practitioner-scholar leaders. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 3(1). Available at http://ucealee.squarespace.com/jrle_2008_3_1
- Beebe, J. (2001). *Rapid Assessment Process: An introduction*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Berry, S., Blankenship, P, Bolt, W., & Phillips, C. (2009, October). *Innovative leadership preparation: What works and why*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration, Atlanta, GA.
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2003). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bransford, J., Brown, A., & Cocking, R. (Eds.). (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Bridges, E. M., & Hallinger, P. (1997). Problem-based leadership development: Preparing educational leaders for changing times. *Journal of School Leadership*, 7(6), 592-608.
- Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Muth, R. (2004). Leadership mentoring in clinical practice: Role socialization, professional development, and capacity building. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(4), 468-494.
- Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Muth, R. (2008). Generative learning communities: Preparing leaders for authentic practice. In R. Papa, C. Achilles, & B. Alford (Eds.), *Leadership on the frontlines: Changes in preparation and practice* (pp. 73-86). Sixteenth Annual Yearbook of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration. Lancaster, PA: Pro>Active.
- Burke, L., Jr., Preston, N., Quillen, M., Roe, R., & Strong, E. (2009, October). *Stages of group development: From strangers to partners*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration, Atlanta, GA.
- Cifuentes, L. (1997). From sages to guides: A professional development study. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 5(1), 67-77.
- Cordiero, P., Boutiler, L., Panicek, J., & Salamone-Consoli, A. (1993, February). *The roles of practitioners, students and professors*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Association of School Administrators Conference-Within-a-Conference, Orlando, FL.
- Cranton, P. (2002, Spring). Teaching for transformation. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 93, 63-71.
- Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Decker, A., Dykes, M., Gilliam, J., & Marrs, S. (2009, October). *Being students again: Balancing ambiguities, expectations, and responsibilities*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration, Atlanta, GA.
- Drath, W. H., & Paulus, C. J. (1994). *Making common sense: Leadership as meaning-making in a community of practice*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Foreman, J., & Johnston, T. (1999). Key aspects of teaching and learning in business and management studies. In H. Fry, S. Ketteridge, & S. Marshall (Eds.), *Handbook for teaching & learning in higher education: Enhancing academic practice* (pp. 372-390). London: Kogan Page.

- Golde, C. M., & Walker, G. E. (Eds.). (2006). *Envisioning the future of doctoral education: Preparing stewards of the discipline*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gutherie, J. W. (2009). The case for a modern Doctor of Education degree (Ed.D.): Multipurpose education doctorates no longer appropriate. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84, 3-8.
- Guzmán, N., & Muth, R. (1999, Fall). Building blocks: Structures and processes for PhD student success. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development*, 11, 83-99.
- Hansman, C. A. (2001, Spring). Context-based adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 42-51.
- Harvard Business School Press. (2006). *Leading teams: Expert solutions to everyday challenges* [Pocket mentor series]. Boston: Author.
- Hebert, F. T., & Reynolds, K. C. (1998). Learning achievements of students in cohort groups. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 46(3), 34-43.
- Hlinka, K., Mayo, T., Mobelini, D., Stephenson, L., & Young, A. (2009, October). *Being and becoming leaders: Application of learning*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration, Atlanta, GA.
- Knowles, M. (1990) *The adult learner: A neglected species* (4th ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf.
- Laiken, M. (1998). *The anatomy of high performing teams: A leader's handbook*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Lambert, L. (1998). How to build leadership capacity. *Educational Leadership*, 55(7), 17-19.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Learner-Centered Principles Work Group. (1997, November). *Learner-centered psychological principals: A framework for school reform and redesign*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, Board of Educational Affairs.
- Loss, C. G. (2009). Building, sustaining, and expanding the education doctorate at Peabody College: An administrative view. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 84, 44-47.
- Martin, W. M., Murphy, M. J., & Muth, R. (1993). Problem-based learning: A new approach to preparing school leaders. In J. Hoyle & D. Estes (Eds.), *NCPEA: In a new voice* (pp. 141-154). First Annual Yearbook of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration. Lancaster, PA: Technomic.
- McCombs, B. L. (1991). Motivation and lifelong learning. *Educational Psychologist*, 26(2), 117-127.
- Merriam, S. B. (2001, Spring). Andragogy and self-directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 3-13.
- Mezirow, J. (1997, Summer). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5-12.
- Milstein, M. M. (1992, October-November). *The Danforth Program for the Preparation of School Principals (DPPSP) six years later: What we have learned*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, Minneapolis, MN.
- Muth, R. (2000). Toward a learning-oriented instructional paradigm: Implications for practice. In P. Jenlink & T. Kowalski (Eds.), *Marching into a new millennium: Challenges to educational leadership* (pp. 82-103). Eighth Annual Yearbook of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Muth, R. (2002). Scholar-practitioner goals, practices, and outcomes: What students and faculty need to know and be able to do. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, 1(1), 67-87.
- Muth, R., Banks, D., Bonelli, J., Gaddis, B., Napierkowski, H., White, C., Wood, V. (2001). Toward an instructional paradigm: Recasting how faculty work and students learn. In T. J. Kowalski & G. Perreault (Eds.), *Twenty-first century challenges for school administrators* (pp. 29-53). Ninth Annual Yearbook of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

- Norris, C. J., Basom, M., Yerkes, D., & Barnett, B. (1996, October). *Leadership platforms: Perspectives and prospects*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, Louisville, KY.
- Peel, H. A., Wallace, C., Buckner, K. G., Wrenn, S. L., & Evans, R. (1998). Improving leadership preparation programs through a school, university, and professional organization partnership. *NASSP Bulletin*, 82(602), 26–34.
- Perry, J. A., & Imig, D. G. (2008). A stewardship of practice in education. *The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 40(6), 42-49.
- Rath, T., & Conchie, B. (2008). *Strengths based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- Savery, J. R., & Duffy, T. M. (1995, September-October). Problem-based learning: An instructional model and its constructivist framework. *Educational Technology*, 35(5), 31-38.
- Schmitt, T., & Perl, A. (2007). A solid foundation simplifies the path to leadership. *International Professional Performance Magazine*, 15(1), 26-26.
- Schulman, L. S., Golde, C. M., Bueschel, A. C., & Garbedian, K. J. (2006). Reclaiming education's doctorates: A critique and a proposal. *Educational Researcher*, 35(3), 25-32.
- Scott, W. R., & Davis, G. F. (2006). *Organizations and organizing: Rational, natural, and open system perspectives*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Shafritz, J. M., Ott, J. S., & Jang, Y. S. (2004). *Classics of organization theory* (6th ed.). Florence, KY: Wadsworth.
- Thompson, J., Licklider, B., & Jungst, S. (2003). Learner-centered teaching: Postsecondary strategies that promote "thinking like a professional." *Theory into Practice*, 42(2), 134-141.
- Walker, G. E., Golde, C. M., Jones, L., Bueschel, A. C., & Hutchins, P. (2008). *The formation of scholars: Rethinking doctoral education for the twenty-first century*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wasley, P. (2007, December). Carnegie Foundation creates new "owner's manual" for doctoral programs. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54(16), A9.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identify*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *A guide to managing knowledge: Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Wolk, S. (1994, November). Project-based learning: Pursuits with a purpose. *Educational Leadership*, 52(3), 42–45.