



Teaching Students in Cohort Groups

by John Presley

It was midway through my first semester back in the classroom after ending a too-long administrative career. I had recently joined the faculty of Illinois State University's College of Education, teaching in the higher education administration's doctoral program. I taught the first half of the semester on campus.

For the second half, I taught at one of the university's regional sites, nearly three hours away from the campus in Normal, IL. One late Friday afternoon, I drove to the site for my first meeting with a class I was team-teaching. These students were part of a cohort recruited to the program years earlier. I soon realized I was naive about the students, their abilities and their expectations.

I arrived early, and within a few minutes of my arrival, two of my new students walked in. I was hovering around the lectern and unloading my briefcase when I realized these two students, after introductions, were jostling me for space—my space, I thought—at the front of the room while hurriedly checking the room's computer-projector system. Although I knew these two were discussion leaders for that week's reading, I quickly learned I had no idea what that truly meant.

My arrivals taught the entire class, supplemented the reading with videos of the authors discussing the implications of their work and led a well-organized class discussion. I sat with the other members of the seminar and—I flatter myself—only pitched in when conversation faltered or needed a more experienced viewpoint to help move it along.

In it together

The department I had joined, Educational Administration and Foundations (EAF), recruits students by cohort. We have students who attend regular on-campus courses and others who attend weekend-only classes scheduled especially for them, as well as regional cohorts of students who attend carefully planned sequenced courses at off-campus sites.

It was in later conversations I learned more about the students in this particular regional cohort. They were diverse in age—ranging from 30 to 55—gender and ethnicity. Cohort students are typically early or midway in their careers and work in a wide range of institutions: community college, small private college or regional comprehensive university.

Because these students are in the middle of their careers, teaching cohort students is different from any teaching I'd done before. These students are my professional colleagues—some are faculty and others are administrators. It is wonderful to have three-hour conversations with these colleagues and lively exchanges based on seminar readings or, just as frequently, on current events and crucial higher education issues. Additionally, cohort students bring amazing perspectives to the seminar because they work in student affairs, admissions, housing, athletics, public relations and continuing education. Their varied points of view make for informed discussions.

But, perhaps most striking about these students—aside from their hard work—is their trust and respect for each other. Evening or weekend classes are especially difficult for working



adults with children and other family responsibilities. Cohort students share solutions for these situations. They know each other well, and they understand how difficult it is to weigh family time, health problems or transportation issues against finding an hour every day to read and write for their governance and structure in a higher education seminar.

Peer support

When asked to identify the positive aspects of cohort programs, students usually rank the support of their peers first. One of my students told me how her group had kept members from dropping out of the program. She admitted, "Sometimes finishing my doctorate seemed less important than just not letting my friends down."

They appreciate the design of a cohort-based curriculum sequenced and planned to fit work and academic-year schedules for them. They also appreciate the opportunity to talk with peers, faculty advisors and committee members about ways to synchronize their individual schedules and commitments with the program. Sometimes, if a student falls out of sequence with the program, which is usually due to a major life event, an individualized readings class or a substitute course might need to be offered as a timely substitute for one of the required courses. Surprisingly, this is rarely necessary.

Students, as well as the faculty, also appreciate the opportunity to be genuine (their word) in class when exchanging ideas with colleagues. One of the meanings of genuine in this case, I think, is the chance to be candid in using day jobs as illustrations or examples when discussing or applying organizational theories. One student wrote that she particularly valued the way the cohort "learned from one another about our cultures, our perspectives and our goals." Of those differing perspectives, another student said, "I now see higher education through a different lens."

Similarly, and perhaps most satisfying to instructors, cohort students report they apply theories and solutions discussed in their classes and readings almost immediately. "I have used almost every class in managing my division," one student said. Another of her peers said, "This experience has made a difference for me ... I have changed my leadership, my management and even the structure of my program." Faculty in our doctoral programs are capitalizing on these students' immersion in their own institutions and developing dissertation options to allow cohort students to explore solutions to problems and issues at their current jobs.

Cohort students appreciate online instruction, whether delivered with platforms such as Elluminate or Blackboard, or with simpler methods such as e-mail and websites. But they most appreciate face-to-face instruction, with online methods used as occasional substitutes to make resources easily available and to make communication with each other and with instructors faster.

Students are usually doing their reading, writing and researching on weekends or before breakfast and after dinner, so assignments must be clear. Counterintuitively for me, group assignments must be minimized or even assigned to be completed in the classroom. Some cohort students may see each other at work, but others may find it impossible to link with another member except during weekends or classes. But these classes are lengthy, and as any experienced instructor knows, teaching methods must be varied to keep interest high, even for



adult learners. Short stints of group work make for effective diversions from presentations or discussions.

Reflections

When I was preparing to join the EAF faculty, my sense of relief and delight about leaving the administrative ranks slowly gave way to concern about teaching details. It is no cliché that I had forgotten, and was therefore anxious about, the total effort my new teaching career would require. Could I be a successful teacher again? Could I serve as an effective practitioner or professor of the practice—the role I had assumed for the department?

I was relieved to find my on-campus students appreciated this role, but I was surprised to learn my cohort students appreciated it even more. They seem delighted to find themselves in frank, genuine and collegial conversations with a former dean and provost. That, above all, helped make my experience teaching doctoral students in cohorts more rewarding than I could have imagined during that nervous summer before I began teaching again.

I realize advice from a newly returned instructor may be presumptuous, but my advice for instructors who are new to teaching adult cohort graduate students is this: Assign work carefully, and overwhelm students' weekends with reading. You should even try to assign appropriate amounts of work and reading scheduled for each day between classes. Arrange for a librarian to meet with your cohort to brief students about recent changes in electronic research methods, new software and new acquisitions. Additionally, treat students as professional colleagues, and be approachable in the classroom, at work and even back at home. Always pay for your share of the class's pizza before it's delivered—you can become as supportive as the other members of the cohort. Enjoy yourself, and enjoy your new colleagues.

John Presley is an English professor at Illinois State University (ISU) in Normal. There, Presley teaches in ISU's higher education administration's doctoral programs and serves as editor of planning and changing. He was provost at ISU from 2003-2008 and previously served as an academic administrator at four universities. A frequent contributor in modern literature, education and civic engagement, Presley serves on the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' National Implementation Committee for the American Democracy Project. His most recent publication is The Future of Higher Education: Perspectives from America's Academic Leaders (with Gary Olson). He also has several upcoming publications on civic and political engagement.