

Connectivity and Collectivity in a Doctoral Cohort Program: An Academic Memoir in Five Parts

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In this critical reflection, four doctoral graduates and one professor, all involved in a cohort-based educational leadership doctoral program, provide narratives about key processes and moments that contributed to building powerful connections and a collective orientation to the groups' learning and success. Dialogic processes, conscious intention, and naming shared values were established early in the program by the cohort members enabling them to take ownership of their learning and to commit to the group's collectivity and connectivity. We argue this cohort's processes illustrate how shared and democratic leadership was not only a topic of discussion, it was also successfully enacted.

Dans cette réflexion critique, quatre titulaires d'un doctorat et un professeur, tous impliqués dans un programme de troisième cycle sur le leadership éducationnel et reposant sur une cohorte, présentent des récits portant sur les procédés et les moments clés qui ont contribué à la création de liens puissants et une orientation collective visant l'apprentissage et la réussite du groupe. Les membres de la cohorte ont établi, dès le début du programme, des procédés dialogiques, une intention consciente et l'identification de valeurs partagées, ce qui leur a permis de s'approprier leur apprentissage et de s'engager dans la cohésion et la connectivité du groupe. Nous soutenons que les procédés de cette cohorte illustrent dans quelle mesure un leadership partagé et démocratique n'est pas resté seulement un sujet de discussion, mais a été en fait mis sur pied.

This is a narrative account of four doctoral graduates and one professor's experiences of a particular cohort of an Education Doctorate (EdD) leadership program that embraced principles of collaboration, community and dialogue. The authors of this article include Joan, a former senior college administrator, Sandy and Jeanie, who were both independent consultants in group and team building, and Jennifer a practicing Buddhist and university counsellor who also had a private counseling practice. The fifth author is Shauna, a faculty member who has been involved with this EdD program since its inception and who was the research supervisor for Joan, Jeanie, and Jennifer and the university examiner for Sandy.

In this article we analyse our narratives in order to reveal the key factors that contributed to this cohort's commitments to collaboration and shared success that created a kind of experiential learning environment within which democratic educational leadership was both studied and enacted. Doyle and Smith (2001, p. 1) argue that shared leadership is not about the attributes of individuals, rather it is about the character of social interaction and social relations,

that is, “how people act together to make sense of the situations that face them.” Doyle and Smith also suggest that shared or democratic leadership supports ethical practice. Ownership, learning, and sharing are the three key elements essential to shared leadership—elements that were demonstrated in this cohort’s engagement.

This program, like many other Doctorates of Education, helps to address the leadership crisis facing systems of higher education, a challenge created by the retirement of many educational leaders and the significant changes occurring in the funding and administration of colleges and universities (Romero, 2004). New forms of leadership involving coordination and shared decision making are also gaining attention as the preferred form of governance (Raelin, 2003). As these educational leadership programs increase in number, many universities are using the cohort model, an approach organized around a core, shared program where students complete coursework and other requirements together (Reynolds & Hebert, 1998). While cohort structures in higher education have become increasingly common in the last three decades, the idea of cohorts as a way to organize groups of students has been around for a long time (Maher, 2004). Chairs, McDonald, Shroyer, Urbanski, and Vertin (2002, p. 2) draw attention to other dimensions of cohorts, not just the shared course work:

A successful cohort is not merely a group of people who happen to share the same space, time, professors, and assignments, and enjoy each other's company for a year or two. *A successful cohort is a group of people who work together, provide assistance to each other, find success in their efforts, and simultaneously develop each individual's talents.* [Italics added]

Most studies of cohorts have focused on educational administration programs (Barnett & Muse, 1993). Several positive outcomes have been noted by these studies: (a) enhancement of knowledge (Brooks, 1998), (b) individual development and critical thinking (Chairs et al., 2002), (c) self-reflexivity and increased awareness of one’s own learning process (Lawrence, 2002), and (d) increases in interdependence and positive interaction in the cohort (McPhail, Robinson, & Scott, 2008). As Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, and Wright-Porter (2011) summarize, cohorts are popular because (a) they are easier to administer, (b) they enhance learning and create powerful collaborative interactions, (c) they have higher completion rates, and (d) they enable more substantive exchange of knowledge and skills of cohort members.

Cohorts are not without their problems. They can also “go sideways” if there are conflicts within the group that are not resolved (Agnew, Mertzman, Longwell-Grice, & Saffold, 2008; Mandzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert, 2003), and “group think” and limited access to a wider range of thought have also been raised as concerns (Unzueta, Moores-Abdool, & Donet, 2008). Cohorts are also not predictable phenomena given that the nature of engagement among members depends on so many factors including the personalities and skills of cohort members (McCarthy, Trenga, & Weiner, 2005).

Most of the research has focused on the outcomes of cohorts and not on their inner workings. Furthermore there has been little research employing a narrative approach, and few studies co-authored by and including the perspectives of both students and faculty. We offer this account in an effort to address these gaps. While recognizing that the dynamics of cohorts cannot be simply replicated, this case study of what worked for this cohort can direct attention to certain practices that support the full realization of cohort-based programs. The methodology we used to generate these narratives is described below, followed by an introduction to the EdD program, and our stories.

Methodology

Our methodology was collaborative; this reflected our desire to use an approach that mirrored what we sought to explicate, that is, conditions that supported a particular EdD cohort to commit to a collaborative process. As Tynan and Garbett (2007) argue, collaborative research can disrupt individualism and competition amongst researchers. The main method was collective sharing of memories (Haug, 1987), a process that enables a way to tell stories and to theorize from those narratives. Haug's approach calls for researchers to write memories in response to a trigger question. We discussed which questions might be a useful start for our story telling and also agreed to use an Appreciative Inquiry orientation (Watkins & Mohr, 2001), an approach that begins by asking the question "what's working?" We decided to respond to this overarching question: What were the key elements that supported the cohort's collective or collaborative orientation and the cohort's ownership of learning?

We started this research in 2007 when we were all able to meet face to face. Then, as our locales shifted we started sharing our responses to the main question noted above via e-mail. In 2009, over a period of several months, we held several teleconferences and discussed the themes that were emerging from the written e-mail narratives. It was not a process of simply recording what we already knew. Rather, writing itself was a form of research; through writing the meaning of our experience came into view (Richardson, 2000). The extended period of time taken to complete this project was required given the dynamics of our other work and home lives which included major relocations, changing jobs and health challenges. Taking our time proved to be fruitful for it allowed us to have some distance from our stories and to see patterns that had eluded us before. Analysis of our narratives was also a collaborative process where we all noted some of the common themes as well as pivotal moments. Our analysis also further involved sending drafts of the article to other faculty and cohort members and seeking their feedback.

After briefly describing this particular program below, we have organized the narratives around three broad themes:

1. We share our reflections on beginnings and what desires and concerns we each brought to the cohort program.
2. We comment on key moments in the program that proved to be significant in the cohort's learning to work collaboratively.
3. We conclude with some principles and processes that emerged as central to this cohort's success.

Creating a Space for Critical Examination of Educational Practice

Outline of the Program

The Educational Leadership program, to which these stories refer, began in 1997. It is designed for educational leaders who undertake graduate study while continuing to work full-time. Indeed, the ongoing and dynamic aspect of students' everyday leadership practice is central to the mandate of the program which is to assist students to critically examine their own

educational leadership practice. The curriculum and six required courses are organized around five key foci: education, ethics, leadership, policy, and research. In the first two years, students take the six required courses together. They also participate in an annual fall institute which brings students from all the different cohorts together where they present their work to each other and to faculty who also attend. The schedule includes two intensive summer sessions in year one and two; during the winter and spring, courses are offered on weekends.

Bringing the tacit and private knowledge/theorizing of educational leaders into consciousness and a public (classroom) discussion, as Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997) argue, is a key value underpinning this program which seeks to dissolve the dualism between theory and practice. Those admitted must show evidence of current involvement with educational leadership practice, broadly defined, through both formal administrative positions and less formalized enactments of leadership. We admit applicants from a range of educational contexts as well as those working in health care, government, and business sectors.

By the end of the second year most students have completed their required courses and their comprehensive exams and have begun to focus their attention on clarifying their doctoral research, confirming research committee members, obtaining research proposal approval, and conducting their studies. At this time in the program, students' connection with their cohort peers often weakens as they shift their attention to working with their research supervisors and committee members. This particular cohort was rather unusual in its commitment to maintaining strong connections with each other beyond the program's course requirements.

In the Beginning: Dreaming of Community

The first encounter students have in any graduate program is a significant moment as it sets the stage for future forms of engagement. This is even more important in a cohort-based program. As students enter the doorway of this process, they bring a lot of experience and substantive skills as well as hopes and anxieties which all come together to powerfully influence the shape of a cohort and its personality. Joan, Jeanie, Jennifer and Sandy all shared this mix of excitement and concern.

Having found her master's program rather competitive, individualistic and isolating, Joan began the program hoping for a different experience, one where there was a community of learners. "When I was accepted into the EdD program, I wondered whether something different might be possible. I came craving the possibility of belonging to a community of learners that was invested in everyone else's success as much as their own."

Like Joan, Sandy was also eager for a collective approach to learning. Having taught for five years in a cohort-based master's program, he had witnessed its advantages. While he rates this cohort as the "all-time-most-memorable" team, his beginning was a rocky one. He arrived late having been lost on the new campus, which triggered a familiar critical inner voice that questioned his decision to undertake the program and his abilities to complete it.

As my anxiety mounted, I dreaded the thought of walking into the classroom late. I promptly went into the negative self-talk mode I can do so well. "What a stupid idea to go back to school," I berated myself. "How could you aspire to a doctorate anyway when you can't even find a damned fool classroom? What kind of idiot are you? You should have just stuck with your well-established university teaching and not messed around with going back to school at the age of 48.

Sandy's fears were heightened because he knew about the poor completion rates of doctoral programs. "I was conscious that, as [a] self-employed consultant, I would be challenged to persevere in degree completion when I had many outside interests."

While Sandy had had very positive experiences teaching in a cohort-based program, Jeanie was unsure of this structure. She had heard of problems and thus had some trepidation. And like Sandy she wondered about the sanity of starting a doctorate later in life. While these doubts were present, she was also excited about bringing her considerable experience as a group facilitator to the process.

Becoming a doctoral student at the age of 51 was both challenging and rewarding. I began with some trepidation about the enormity of the work ahead of me and how to fit this into my busy work and personal life. I was both concerned about the cohort format of the program, having heard stories of negative cohort experiences, and excited about bringing my passions as a group facilitator to the process, wondering how I might be part of a group and possibly influence it from within.

Similar to her cohort peers, Jennifer also began with a hope for a kind of cohesiveness, but she also knew that trust was something that had to be developed, not assumed. She wondered how she would aspire to her Buddhist philosophy where obstacles are seen as gifts and opportunities for learning.

I entered our first course a bit late, feeling somewhat fearful and uncertain. I initially had little sense of fit and experienced much doubt. I knew it was important to deepen my own learning about relationships, what makes them work, to understand the "how" in what we do.

As a faculty member who had taught in and supervised many students from this EdD program, Shauna was curious about how things would unfold with this group. She had witnessed some previous cohorts which had not developed cohesively and she also had experienced cohorts where an "us" and "them" orientation between cohort members and faculty had emerged which undermined the potential for growth and collaboration.

As this group started, I was curious about who I might end up supervising and how the group would develop. Would the group establish strong bonds along with respect for differences? Would there be group conflicts? Some previous cohorts I had worked with had been resistant to many of the academic requirements and viewed me as an institutional authority whose job it was to enforce these questionable rules. I also wondered whether I, as a faculty member, had deepened my skills and knowledge about working dialogically with professionals, many of whom I considered my peers. And I wondered how I would respond to resistance, tensions and conflict.

Key Moments

In addition to the first class and course, our analysis of the narratives pointed to several other memorable moments significant in our cohort journey. We start again with Joan for whom the first summer course was crucial to establishing a commitment to collaboration and shared success. The second course proved to be a turning point that tested the values and commitments to respectful dialogue and ownership of their learning that had been put to paper.

By the beginning of the second course, we had established a weak sense of collective self and a budding desire to learn outside the traditional norms of graduate school. The first class of this second course, however, was a struggle; it felt confining, prescriptive and flew in the face of our budding hopes for a dialogue with the professor. I can remember the day quite well, we all stayed behind as if there was some unwritten code holding us. We talked about our unhappiness with the class and most importantly, about the guidelines we had agreed to in the first class: agreements to respect each other and "outsiders," to create inclusion and take ownership for our learning. Instead of complaining about the professor, at the beginning of the next class we talked to him about our hopes and dreams, about possibility and how learning was the most important thing for us, not marks and certainly not differentiated marks. He changed and teasingly accused us of socializing him. Through him we learned about ethics, hard decisions, and about how in the face of difference, there is sometimes a bridge to some other place that contains graduate education at its best. I look back at his professorial work with us as one of my most powerful experiences of a group working with an individual to undertake appreciative reframing (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006).

Jeanie also speaks to the challenges the group faced during the second course and how working *with* the professor, rather than *against* him, reflected their commitments to respectful relationships.

The rupture that occurred in the second course, already mentioned by Joan, helped to solidify our values and group agreements. While we were all upset by the approach of the professor, rather than complaining to others, which would have contravened our conscious intent to support and include all who worked with us, we banded together to work *with* the professor, being assertive about the collaborative way we wanted to learn. He acknowledged our process and requests and agreed to a more collaborative format which deepened our group interconnectedness.

Sandy's reflections on key moments were greatly influenced by his many years of experience as a team-building consultant. He notes below how few groups survive adversity but this cohort's commitment to support each other's growth was crucial for him, particularly when his privileged position as a white male was challenged in a second year research course that taught feminist and Indigenous approaches.

In that course, my social location as a "tall white male with a deep voice," was examined . . . and I became aware of the power and the privileges that had helped bring me to that place. All of a sudden, the childhood abuses that I was so conscious of, as a handicap, were placed in perspective.

Like Sandy, the feminist and Indigenous research course was also a pivotal moment for Jeanie. As a declared feminist, she embraced how this course focused on examining perspectives and provided alternative perspectives.

We had the privilege to look at the world through other lenses than those of the dominant culture: we explored notions of power, privilege and oppression. As well, in this course Sandy and I were in the same project team that experienced some interpersonal challenges. These challenges allowed us to deepen our understanding and analysis of group development, both of our areas of practice and research. This course also really established our collaborative work together which continued throughout the research process.

This research course was also embraced by Jennifer who describes her pivotal moment as the first class which, for her, almost went "sideways." A query by another cohort member swiftly positioned Jennifer as the "other." The rupture she felt was, importantly, repaired by Joan who intervened in a powerful way so that Jennifer felt included.

As our round of cohort introductions began, we each spoke of ourselves in relation to our work and interest in the program. During this round, when I introduced myself, another member asked "where was I from?" A seemingly simple question, banal, and trite, yet it points to obvious racial differences and is a question that marks one as an outsider. I usually ignore what is implied by this question, but here it was again, in the beginning of establishing a group with whom I was going to study for the next four years. I replied that I came from Montreal, which is where I had lived for most of my life. My answer (thus me) seemed insufficient as he asked again: "where was I *really* from?" I understood this meant my heritage. I said where I was born and at that moment, I felt apart from the group. What eased that sense of separation was the action of Joan, whose self-introduction followed mine. She began by stating where she was from and asked that we all do the same. This made a huge difference; I felt less apart. This intervention by Joan interrupted how "where are you from?" can serve to reinscribe difference, separation and non-belonging.

Shauna recalls a pivotal moment in the second summer when she was teaching an elective course on community taken by many members of this cohort including Joan, Sandy, and Jeanie. It was a moment when she witnessed the group's commitment to ensuring that courses met their learning needs.

I recall a time when this group's values were enacted in relation to the summer course I was teaching. With good use of humour, the six 2001 cohort members in my class gently pointed out the contradiction between my emphasis on creating an inclusive, flexible community that allowed and embraced diversity and what was interpreted as rigid parameters for one particular course assignment. It was a great moment of learning for the whole class when, using respectful dialogue, these "rules" were questioned and alternatives negotiated.

Another moment remembered by Shauna was when she was in the early stages of supervising Jeanie's dissertation. Another faculty member had come on board but the second meeting of the committee was filled with tension. Shauna again witnessed this conscious intention to their learning that she had seen before. In this scenario Jeanie articulated her concerns and took strategic action to have them met.

When I first started working as Jeanie's research supervisor she had decided on a particular research topic and I had invited a colleague with expertise in this area to join the committee. At the second meeting it became apparent there was tension developing between Jeanie and the second committee member. She spoke to me later, telling me that she had listened carefully to her inner voice, examined why she was resisting the feedback from the other committee member, and after careful consideration had decided to radically change directions. She wrote to the second committee member about the change and asked her to step down. I was blown away with Jeanie's courage, given the traditional power relations between faculty and graduate students. Asserting one's needs and making changes to committee membership are often very difficult for students.

Conscious Intention and Commitment to Learning: Key Principles and Processes

In this final section of our analysis, we each narrate what we believe are the principles and processes that were foundational to the cohort's development as a collaborative collective. They have already been touched upon in the earlier quotes. A key factor was the conscious intention to take responsibility for individual learning as well as for the collective, outlined in the guidelines the group developed in the first class. This declaration was not just a paperwork exercise; it was acted upon at other moments in the program which involved speaking out and taking risks. An Appreciative Inquiry orientation and a commitment to respectful and dialogic engagement aided by the circle process, which is discussed later, were also central to the cohort's development as a collaborative collective.

The first course, as has been noted, proved to be significant for the establishment of ways of working together. That said, undertaking a process of setting guidelines and values may not have been as effective if there had not been a critical mass of cohort members committed to this approach. Jeanie comments on this:

Fundamentally there were enough of us with skills in facilitating groups that allowed us to intentionally build our group. My co-authors/cohort members, Joan, Jennifer and Sandy, brought many interpersonal and group development skills. As well, our co-author/program faculty member, Shauna, was open and encouraging in our cohort development process.

Jeanie also points to how the setting of guidelines was not initially embraced, nor was it a simple technical exercise.

Leadership involves taking risks, being authentic and vulnerable. The first example of this was the risk I took in our first course to say "why don't we establish some agreements for working together" and was silenced by one cohort member (white male) who said, "We don't need to do that. We're all adults . . ." I refused to give up, knowing, from my many years of experience facilitating groups, the importance of developing group guidelines (agreements, ground rules, norms, and values). By the end of our first course we had established the conscious intent that we would support each others' success throughout the program and we would be inclusive and supportive of all those who worked with us.

Sandy also reflects on the process of setting ground rules and how they were enacted throughout their learning journey.

In the first course, I advocated along with another cohort member for common values and ground rules as well, pushing past a suggestion that we might copy the values and ground rules from other groups. Ultimately we agreed on the values of inclusivity and respect and a ground rule of deep listening. Through repeated reference to certain revelations being confidential, we developed a clear understanding that what was said in the group stayed in the group. In retrospect, it was not the specifics of what we agreed on, but rather the act and expression of our intent to stay connected and the naming of the concepts behind our values and ground rules that were pivotal in our group process.

As Joan notes, engaging dialogically and working collaboratively rather than competitively, did not mean all was smooth sailing. It was a process that was initially resisted by some.

We began to explore taking a non-competitive stance, having agreements around interaction, feminism, and what it meant to belong. We also discussed how we would call each other on the hard stuff. What would it look like to all finish together? We began to call ourselves “4 X 4,” referring to how we were the fourth cohort and that we would finish in four years. The four-year goal shifted to a commitment to our collective success, whatever the length of the journey. When we started there were those in our cohort who did not want to be part of a community of learners, but as we created spaces that allowed for dialogue, what opened up was a door to deeper learning that proved to be powerful; no one wanted to turn away.

Another key process was sustaining the connection and collective sensibility to the learning group beyond the structure of the classroom. Joan, Sandy, Jeanie and Jennifer had the idea of having an independent reading course as one of the electives which would enable the cohort to do further reading on areas of their interest and create another space for them to come together and not work in isolation. An invitation went out to all 12 members of the cohort to join the reading circle. Sandy recalls the moment when this idea emerged. “After three courses, we had an unscheduled semester and several of us requested to do a group directed study.”

The group’s commitment to a dialogic and collective process was deepened in this directed reading course by the introduction of Baldwin’s (1998) circle process. Jeanie and Sandy brought this approach to the study group; they were quite familiar with Baldwin’s concept and the three cycles and key guidelines. The first part involves each person speaking without interruption, feedback or commentary. A general discussion follows. The circle closes with a round where people offer their thoughts, again without interruption, comment or feedback. Jeanie describes how this approach threaded its way throughout the remainder of the program.

We also brought the circle process into our final required course and the faculty fully participated. Before the start of our weekend of oral comprehensive exams we also held a circle. For the exam we arranged the tables and chairs to reflect the circle format which shifted the process more towards dialogue. Eleven of the original 12 of us took the exam (one class member was unable to continue due to illness and other life issues) and we all passed, the first cohort to do so on the first try.

Baldwin’s (1998) concept was not simply replicated by this group, it was adjusted to suit the needs of the participants. Jennifer made a significant intervention when she challenged the group’s initial focus of discussion which was on the readings. In an effort to consciously serve her own needs, she requested that the group also be a space to talk about other parts of their lives. “I shot down our focus on intellectual sharing in the early circle session when [I] told them I hadn’t read a ‘darned thing’; I wanted to talk about myself as a person.”

Another key dimension of our cohort’s ability to maximize the cohort process to serve their learning needs was how the tacit knowledge and skills of the group became expressed. Their abilities to facilitate dialogic interaction, develop trust, encourage risk taking, work appreciatively, and engage with the circle process profoundly influenced the pedagogical quality of this program. While this program is explicit in its desire to welcome and embrace the professional knowledge and experiences of cohort members, this cohort also brought their pedagogical skills to bear on the forms of engagement.

Sandy speaks to how this reading course allowed him another space to bring his background and skills to bear for the benefit of the group.

I parlayed my 35 years of group work and my study with Christina Baldwin into the role, for a time, of guardian or keeper of our nascent group circle process that eventually became our signature process and our ongoing way of meeting. We went on to build a "made-by-us" circle practice as a part of connected self-directed learning.

Jeanie's work with Appreciative Inquiry, an orientation to problem solving that starts with asking the question "what's working" also became part of the cohort's approach.

Throughout our program I also tried to practice compassion and open listening to others' perspectives which was challenging at times given our diversity of learning styles and ways of communicating. Appreciative Inquiry (Watkins & Mohr, 2001) is a significant philosophical and methodological part of my own facilitating practice and was a key part of my doctoral research methodology. I took it to heart in our group processes, working hard to focus on everyone's strengths and contributions.

Jennifer's Buddhist philosophy also significantly shaped the cohort's process. She speaks of how there were many moments of struggle and how she was challenged to stay open to these difficulties and their possibilities of enlarged thought.

The program presented multiple opportunities to remember the intention of my Buddhist practice, i.e., to let go of the tendency to always want life to be a certain way, and instead, to work with each situation, to lean into the difficult spaces and practice radical acceptance which refers to those aspects of creating space and not getting caught in a small perspective.

In Shauna's narrative she notes how this cohort greatly impressed her with its commitments to dialogue and collaboration; while faculty were committed to the cohort structure of the program and its potential for building cooperation and respect for diverse worldviews, it was the cohort members themselves who really brought life to these values, and expanded them.

This particular cohort stands out in my experiences of teaching and advising many EdD students as quite unique with respect to their declared commitment, from the beginning of the program, to shared leadership and a collective orientation to success. They also took ownership of their education, and made a commitment to work dialogically, not only with each other, but with faculty and the larger institution.

A final key element of this cohort's success with their commitment to collaboration and cooperation was how they dealt with difference. Cohorts are viewed by some as problematic because they can lead to "group think" and also not embrace differences. This cohort had several key moments where encounters with difference were welcomed. As has been noted, Jennifer tells the story of her first class and how she felt singled out for her different ancestry. Joan's suggestion that everyone answer the question, "where are you from," created a space for differences to be present and spoken about. Jennifer also recalls the significance of the research course and how that course discussed the epistemological power of researcher's worldviews and the importance of analyzing these perspectives, particularly those that represented dominant interests.

We were asked to recognize the self of the researcher, investigate our locations, *and to question them*. In my experience, this was the first time the institution, as represented by faculty and curriculum, created a space to *question* the dominant discourse. This was the first time differences in our personal location, as they related to systemic positions, were allowed to openly surface and be named. Questioning privilege became possible. Recognizing exclusion became alive and deconstructing positions was the norm. In that course we worked in small groups and had to question our normative assumptions and look systemically at our location and the issues we wanted to research. We had to identify our personal viewpoints and question how/where those viewpoints were privileged and what they excluded. I believe the legitimization of diverse voices and experiences is fundamental. For me, this meant that my experience was included in the larger discussion, I was not "other." This shared examination meant that I could survive being vulnerable and I was able to take more risks and, with what Sandy calls "a leap of faith," I spoke up.

Discussion and Implications

This inquiry illustrates the power of a collaborative and dialogic process, one built on a vision of shared success, rather than individual competition. Collaboration, like shared leadership, has received increasing attention as a strategy adopted for a variety of contexts (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006). This narrative inquiry points to key practices such as setting guidelines and identifying values at the beginning of the program and testing and returning to these commitments as the group moved through the program which created conditions to support collaboration, which Thomson, Perry, and Miller (2007, p. 3) describe as a "process involving shared norms and mutual beneficial interactions."

These stories also reflect the key role that dialogic interaction played in creating collaboration and connectivity. Dialogue and collaboration were more fully realized because there was a critical mass of cohort members who came with some pre-existing skills in this approach. As Freire (1970) points out, dialogue is a process as well as a philosophical orientation, not simply a set of techniques, although certain practices, such as deep listening, help to sustain it. As Freire explains, "authentic education is not carried on by 'A' for 'B' or by 'A' about 'B' but rather by 'A' with 'B' mediated by the world" (emphases in original, p. 82). Similar to Freire, Burbules, and Rice (1991) speak to the significance of relationality for dialogue to occur, and note how relations are dynamic, sometimes unpredictable, and can be transformational. This dialogical interaction and relational orientation to difference was evident in the first class as well as in the group's negotiation with the professor teaching the second class and their work with Baldwin's (1998) circle process.

While each cohort is unique and, as noted, there are no recipes for ensuring the creation of a learning community or of a collaborative process, our reflections point to several dimensions that can enable cohorts to work collaboratively and collectively. We suggest that these processes and philosophies are key (a) to helping cohort programs realize their full potential, as outlined in cohort studies, (b) to enhancing knowledge, develop critical thinking and reflexivity, and (c) to embracing interdependence of individual and group success. Furthermore, we suggest that by engaging in dialogic processes, cohorts can provide direct experience with democratic and shared leadership.

We recommend that cohorts be assisted to bring conscious intention to their learning, and to share the ownership of individual and group success with faculty and their cohort peers. We also recommend that cohorts articulate their expectations and commitments early in learning processes as it can create a powerful space for cohort members to speak their truths and hear

each other. Experimenting with processes like Baldwin's (1998) "calling the circle" could provide a solid pedagogical foundation.

These commitments are significantly enabled by starting in a good way through introductions that embrace differences as well as similarities. Facilitators of these processes need to be aware of interactions that can "other" certain cohort members because of their differences. Introductions can involve assignments wherein cohort members interview each other at length which can support a process that goes beyond superficial engagements. Spending some time with introductions can also help to reveal cohort members' pedagogical skills and how they can be brought to bear on the curriculum such that cohort members share the responsibility of their learning with faculty. Cohorts bring leadership experiences as well as specific skills that can contribute as much to the program as the formal curriculum.

In Conclusion . . .

Our narratives can be viewed as a kind of counter-narrative to academic processes that tend to be competitive and focused on individual labour and success. Through explicit commitment to both individual and collective success, Western models of knowledge creation which assumes knowledge is created by individuals was challenged. This cohort embraced an alternative view--everyone contributes to societal knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006). Embracing this more horizontal, rather than vertical engagement with the academy is, however, messy and dynamic (Kochan & Mullen, 2003) and in some respects harder and more laborious than hierarchical "banking" education (Freire, 1970). A collaborative approach calls for creativity and imagination, which Smith (2001) argues contributes to a process where "the sum is greater than the individual parts" (p. 135). This group's slogan of "4 X 4" articulated this sense of shared success.

Herman and Mandell (2004, p. 42) capture well the nature of this group's collaborative engagement in which ". . . people serve each other's practical needs, in which they help each other make their beliefs more truthful, in which they treat each other respectfully and justly, and in which they find delight and beauty in their association."

Exploring the intricacies and complexities of cohort experiences is an important area of research and we encourage other cohorts and faculty members working with them to share their stories. We particularly encourage inquiries using collective memory as it is a process that can illuminate key aspects of learning that may not be apparent in the moment. We hope our stories can serve as the trigger for others to ask "what has worked for you?"

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