

COHORT PROGRAMMING AND LEARNING: IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Iris M. Saltiel and Charline S. Russo. (2001). Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 121 pages.

Saltiel and Russo's *Cohort Programming and Learning* gives a detailed account of the practical aspects of cohort-based educational design. As the authors state, the concept of cohort-based learning refers to "a group of individuals who enter a program at the same time, proceed through all classes and academic program requirements together, and complete the program as a group" (p. 1). More than simply grouping learners together, the cohort model involves an established curriculum and bounded group structure, and aims to foster collaborative learning within a collegially supportive group environment. The cohort model is gaining popularity in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degree programs that are primarily oriented toward mid-career professionals. The aim of the book is to serve as a resource manual for educators or administrators interested in designing cohort-based programs for adult learners.

The book consists of eight chapters. The first two chapters present an overview of the specific features that make the cohort model unique. According to Saltiel and Russo, the cohort model derives its uniqueness from its contained program framework and closed membership. The authors emphasize the community and continuity fostered within the cohort group, as learners share ideas and critical feedback and work to support each other's progress through their shared educational journey. The next three chapters address cohort-based program design, curriculum development, and strategies for teaching and learning. They identify a range of considerations involved in cohort-based program planning, from establishing specific educational goals, to recruiting students and faculty, to selecting appropriate instructional and evaluative techniques. The final three chapters discuss the attributes of cohort learners, implications for practice, and future considerations. The authors identify the intensive group learning experience and the greater certainty of group completion as key strengths of the cohort model, making it "a compelling solution to educational needs today" (p. 106).

Although *Cohort Programming and Learning* effectively addresses the practical dimensions of cohort-based program design, Saltiel and Russo write as confirmed cohort "boosters" and their unquestioned support for this educational model contributes to two notable weaknesses of the book. The

first is that the authors' praise for the "marvellous" and "magic" qualities of the cohort model is not balanced by any consideration of its potential limitations. They describe the "lockstep" nature of cohort programming and the "members only" cohort group structure in resoundingly positive terms, without acknowledging the possibility of any downside. The sacrifice of course choice associated with the packaged nature of cohort programs might be seen by some as a serious deficiency. The idea of only interacting with the same group of learners throughout one's entire educational program also has significant potential drawbacks. It raises the spectre of being stuck for the whole time in a dysfunctional "group from hell," or of rehashing the same issues over and over again without the fresh ideas and new perspectives that a more open group membership might bring.

The second weakness is that the authors provide little in the way of empirical data or critical perspective to support or contextualize their assertions. They start from the position that the cohort model clearly works, and build on this assumption without question, and without serious corroboration. The tenor of the book is more of sales than scholarship, enthusiastically—and merely—asserting all the great qualities of a new product on the market. The lack of a solid empirical foundation makes the authors' glowing testimonials on behalf of the cohort model sound thin and cheerleader-ish. The lack of a critical perspective reflects an unquestioned acceptance of the increasing corporatization of adult and higher education. For Saltiel and Russo, some of the definite pluses of the cohort model are its "for profit" potential, and its capacity to better meet the needs of business and industry through offering the most expedient way to achieve credentialing requirements. There is no hint of consideration that the interests of education and profit might stand in some tension with each other, or that keeping pace with the dominant cult of efficiency may not be the best way to foster deep knowledge of the messy complexities of the personal and social world.

As a university educator with previous experience teaching in a graduate cohort program, I am in fact an avowed fan of the cohort model, and could handily supplement Saltiel and Russo's ringing testimonials with some of my own. In my experience, the cohort model *does* provide opportunities for creativity and innovation not as readily available in other instructional contexts; the learners *do* form powerful group bonds that allow for extended and insightful critical debate; the ordered schedule of programming *does* contribute to a sense of conceptual continuity; and dropout rates *are* kept to a minimum. I concur with these positive attributes of cohort programming, and

appreciate Saltiel and Russo’s effective work in describing them clearly and well. However, my experience of cohort teaching has also given me the opportunity to observe some of its potential shortcomings. It is clearly not a model for everyone, and—as with any program structure or curriculum design—is only as good as the people working within it. More importantly, for all the positive benefits of the cohort model, there are also important questions to be raised about its potential co-optation within the dominant market frame. One of the best parts of my cohort teaching experience was that, because of the rich community of inquiry fostered within the cohort group, these very questions could be explored openly in group discussions. My major disappointment with Saltiel and Russo’s book is that they are not explored at all.

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