

Chapter XXII

Cohort Programming

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the use of cohort programming within the Career Technical Education field. Cohorts are ideal formats for CTE curricula since students participate in the majority of coursework together. They provide mutual academic and intellectual encouragement and reinforce the transfer of skills to the workplace. Developing cohorts within an online electronic teaching and learning environment is addressed at formal and informal levels. Instructing and facilitating in an e-learning environment requires the effective use of technological tools, which are overviewed in this chapter. Also addressed are instructor challenges and methods that will continually evolve as technological advances occur. Cohort programming is an innovative and practical way of enhancing student economic opportunities and creating lifelong learners.

INTRODUCTION

Students who enter a program together, proceed through classes and finish together are called a cohort (Reynolds & Hebert, 1998; Saltiel & Russo, 2001). Cohorts are particularly popular among adult students. While this configuration has been widely used in face-to-face education and training;

its use with and through e-learning is considered innovative. Therefore, an examination of how the cohort model is used online is called for.

In this chapter, an important practical analysis is presented regarding the use of the cohort programming model and e-learning applications for career and technical education. Objectives of the chapter include two key elements: How to

best shed light on the teaching learning process in an e-learning environment and is the process enhanced by the use of the cohort model. This chapter focuses its discussion and analysis on preparing the career, technical and adult education instructor to use the cohort model online.

BACKGROUND

The well established paradigm of face-to-face, traditional educational instruction provides a venue for examining the adult learner in an instructional setting. Knowles (1980) maintained that an adult learner was characteristically different from the child learner in several aspects. The adult learner moves from a concept of being dependent (i.e., on the teacher/instructor) toward being more self-directed in acquiring skills and knowledge. The adult learner not only accumulates a reservoir of experience but is increasingly more able to use experience as a resource for learning. Further, the adult learner is “ready to learn.” It is noted that compulsory learning is only required of children within the American Educational System. Further schooling (post secondary) is generally associated with occupational or professional education and training. We cannot require someone to become a medical doctor, but once an individual seeks to become one we can identify education requirements. The readiness to learn, coupled with goal attainment (Houle, 1961) become powerful motivators for the adult learner.

Lastly the adult learner seeks to further the acquisition of applied or useful knowledge. This concept also represents a shift from the subject-centered learning process to problem solving focus or applied knowledge as a primary focus. White and Bridwell (2004) remind us that the roles of teacher and learner have shifted due to the vast amount of knowledge. The knowledge age pertains to processes that oversee the creation, dissemination and use of knowledge. Learners are typically central to the formal and

informal education context. Within the distance learning setting, the environment is influenced by demographic, social, economic, and technological changes. In addition, variances in individual and societal lifestyles, expectations, and existing cultural and social frameworks also influence the environment.

According to a recent report published by National Assessment of Vocational Education (2004), Career and Technical Education (CTE) has been a part of education in America since 1917. CTE has made a significant contribution to education, in general. Since students typically enter and continue together, it may be claimed that CTE has been using the cohort model since its initial inception. This type of contextual learning fosters the application of academic and technical skills to real-life activities. CTE instills learning in the workplace through internship, cooperative education, apprenticeships, and job shadowing experiences. These experiences allow students to develop skills and credentials that meet industry-recognized standards. CTE programs typically consist of a multi-year sequence of courses and are ideal for cohort formations.

Somewhere in this mix of expectations, motivations, and goal pursuit resides the student who wants to learn and the instructor/teacher who wants to teach. The major problem addressed in this chapter is to bring clarity, to the teaching learning process in an e-learning environment and to provide reflection and insight as to how that process can be made more effective using the cohort concept.

COHORT GROUPS

The contemporary use of the term cohort is based on its original use as an identifier of a sub-set of the Roman Legion. Today the cohort is simply a group of learners, beginning a program of studies together, and continuing together throughout the program up to completion. Typically these groups

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