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Living la Vida Loca: The Ups and Downs of Learning in a Cohort System

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Abstract
This paper describes the use of cohort structures in management and leadership education. Cohorts privilege social interaction as the locale where cognition and culture are co-created between individuals. A cohort learning community format allows students and faculty to create opportunities for significant and deep learning—learning that integrates both the conceptual, the social and emotional, the self and the other—in relational spaces by promoting zones of proximal development, multisubjectivity, multivocality, and shared cognition. These are hallmarks of effective learning organizations and communities of practice. But they also present significant and tough challenges. Using creative nonfiction to frame reflections, five authors illuminate their experiences in cohort communities: the benefits, difficult sides, and challenges of creating crucible spaces where social and emotional learning can be explored, and its role in promoting transformational learning.

Keywords
creative nonfiction; management education; leadership; learning communities; transformational learning in cohorts

Introduction

Cohorts are groups of students who begin and complete a course of study together over a specified period, remaining intact and proceeding together through a series of courses and developmental experiences (Lei et al., 2011). Cohort learning (CL) allows for diverse groups of students from various backgrounds to interact, network, and exchange on an ongoing basis. As well, the increased use of the cohort model in professional education programs is seen as a strategy to improve student completion rates in higher education (Lei et al., 2011). Given the increasing popularity of this instructional mode of delivery (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003), it is important to examine its effectiveness in more depth.

Theoretical Foundations of CL

There are three primary theoretical foundations to the CL model.

A Vygotskian Framework

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning privileges social interaction as the locale where cognition and culture are co-created (Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky (1978, 1987) theorizes that everything is learned on two levels: first, through interaction with others, and then integrated into an individual's thinking processes. Thus, cognition is an adaptation to interactions with the learner as an active agent relating to other active agents. Knowledge is constructed through interactions with the world and is an attribute of the relationship between the person and environment. Cohorts create just such an interactive learning space, termed the zone of proximal development (ZPD), i.e., "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development, determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky as cited by Wertsch, 1985, p. 11). Thus, successful CL relies on active and collaborative learning methods (Barnett & Muse, 1993). These interactive social processes consolidate the links between experience and theory, and root learning in prolonged, enduring deep relationships. As Berger & Luckmann (1967, p. 151) note: "Without emotional attachment to significant others, learning would be difficult if not impossible."

Shared Cognition

Shared cognition extends Vygotsky's framework to a broader community. Resnick (1991) contends that cognition is not only the product of the interactions between two individuals, but a product of many embedded in the spaces of collaborative interaction. CL leverages group or community relationships to actively mold and influence each member through the dialogic pondering and sharing of ideas and experiences, collectively building knowledge based not only on their own viewpoints, but also on what they are told by others. Consequently, cognition is not bound by the limitations of any one person's capacity or experience. CL allows multiple realities and possibilities to exist in the same relational space at the same time.

Situated Learning and Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) further refine this notion by anchoring learning in a process of co-participation and engagement in authentic milieus. They contend that learning is situated in a specific context and embedded within a particular practice environment. Therefore, knowledge is not only co-created by interaction, but also arises from the skillful executions of praxis within a particular practice context. Learners participate in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and mastery requires newcomers to move from the periphery towards full participation in the socio-cultural practices of that community. Thus, cognition and expertise are seen as embedded in social relationships, situated in authentic contexts, and nested and negotiated within a culture of practice. The development of professional expertise rests on the CL pillars of situated learning and communities of practice, making cohorts popular and ideal for professional education programs.

Trends Related to the CL Model

Research tends to support the benefits of CL. These fall into three main categories: academic performance and professional growth; meeting the socio-emotional needs of students; and the development of skills. Increases in performance and scholarship (Barnett et al., 2000), program completion rates (Lei et al., 2011), student-led formation of study groups (Maher, 2005), individual goal achievement (Unzueta et al., 2008), the ability to have open honest discussions that positively impact knowledge acquisition (McCarthy et al., 2005), and more opportunities for professional growth and development due to academic and professional networks (Unzueta et al., 2008) have all been associated with CL. It also tends to result in sustained interaction among individuals over the lifetime of their professional careers (Barnett et al., 2000).

The ability of CL to meet the socio-emotional needs of students has also been seen, especially in the areas of increased encouragement and motivation (Barnett et al., 2000), psychological support (McCarthy et al., 2005), satisfying students' need for affiliation and sense of belonging (Maher, 2005), and cohesion and a collective sense of accomplishment and community (Seed, 2008). Murphy (1993) succinctly summarizes the impact of CL: "The cohort structure promotes the development of community, contributes to enhanced academic rigor, and personalizes an otherwise anonymous set of experiences for students" (p. 239).

Perhaps the most persuasive dimension of CL is the development of skills and the transfer of learning that are specific to a professional context, providing opportunities to integrate and apply materials learned in the classroom to students' respective fields (McCarthy et al., 2005). As well, more general skills like collaboration and self-management (Hasinoff et al., 2003), reflective capacity (Barnett et al., 2000), conflict resolution (Maher, 2005), collective goal setting and community building (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003), and increases in emotional and social intelligence (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008; Thompson et al., 2020) are also by-products of CL. These skills in particular are in alignment with working in contemporary organizations, in the for-profit, non-profit, and social enterprise sectors. Therefore, using a CL model in management education programs is key in order to prepare individuals to effectively work and lead in modern workplaces. The use of CL as a modeling experience for workplace learning is widespread (Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008; Maher, 2005; Raelin, 2007; Stinson, 2004; Thompson et al., 2020).

Using Arts-based Research

Generally, research about CL tends to use traditional quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Though both approaches have well-established strengths, quantitative methods can disconnect the research results from salient and unique social forces that have shaped participants' experiences. Qualitative analyses run the risk of presenting dry, desiccated findings bereft of the life, blood, and yearning that typifies human experience (Reilly, 2013). Therefore, this paper employs an arts-based research (ABR) approach. ABR describes research that involves or includes the arts in some capacity to examine experience, advance knowledge, and communicate research understandings (McNiff, 2008). The advantages of using this approach include (Leavy, 2018):

1. It is holistic in that it captures a fuller texture and the deeper complexity of lived experiences.
2. It is both evocative and provocative, creating an effective way of accessing the emotions, desires, and passions of people, cutting through superficiality, and communicating these in powerful and inspiring ways.

As Clough (2002) suggests, research requires approaches that allow for deep penetration into life in a way more traditional methods do not permit, a way that "opens up to its audiences a deeper view of life in familiar contexts" (p. 8). In particular, this work employs the ABR method of creative nonfiction (CNF) to highlight salient dimensions of CL. CNF generates connectedness and empathy, allowing readers to vicariously participate in the lifeworld of individuals who have taught and learned in cohorts. By representing our lived experiences as vignettes, we, the authors, illuminate the telling of a common experience from numerous personal perspectives. In this way, the "truth" about CL emerges from a refracted meaning that arises from reflections on these pieces.

Creative Nonfiction

CNF represents a different epistemological stance and way of viewing the world; it is the meeting place of the scientific-literary dichotomy (Barone, 2008). This method of representation uses facts to tell a truthful story, but in a dramatic, interesting, and evocative way (Caulley, 2008). Controversy surrounds CNF, since this is seen as contradictory. Caulley notes: "To some, the word *creative* implies that you make up the facts, that it is not truthful, that it's really fiction. Actually, [it] is deeply committed to the truth" (p. 426). CNF claims a space between fact and fiction where a different textual dynamic is played out. One takes "certain storytelling liberties … [but] remain faithful to the characters and to the essential drift of the events as they really happened" (Berendt, 1994 as cited in Barone, 2008, p. 108). CNF signals to the reader the coexistence of an ostensible paradox: proximity to the "truth" (the essential drift of events as they happened) and establishing storytelling liberties (Barone, 2008). It utilizes the literary techniques of scene, dialogue, hyperbole, and description, allowing a personal point of view and voice to emerge. CNF goes beyond the reporting of facts; it delivers them in ways that move readers toward a deeper understanding, allowing them to discover underlying meaning. We present a series of vignettes connected by a series of reflections on instructional practices—drama connected by narrative illustrating salient dimensions of CL.

Illuminating the Beneficial Aspects of CL

Collective Spaces: Producing New Knowledge

CL allows students and faculty to create opportunities for significant, deep, and integrating learning in spaces where personal and collective transformation are possible (Wertsch, 1985). For CL to be effective in sparking new ways of thinking, doing, and being, multisubjectivity must emerge from the learning interactions (Reilly & Mcbrearty, 2010). The acceptance of multiple social realities gives way to co-constructed knowledge. Easier said than done about a process that is nebulous and unclear. Co-constructing knowledge demands that faculty and students engage in deep dialogue (Isaacs, 1999), tolerate uncertainty, encourage self-reflection, nurture open inquiry, suspend assumptions, and be open to new insights through empathetic listening.

Crafting an environment that nurtures multisubjectivity and dialogue epitomizes both the strength of CL and the considerable challenge of creating such spaces, filled to the brim with divergent values, expectations, and ways of being and understanding. When coupled with the pressures for achievement spawned in professional education programs, this task becomes considerable. But multisubjectivity is elemental to learning as transformation. Multisubjectivity, and its companion multivocality (i.e., learning that accepts and encourages many different narratives or parallel discourses) facilitate the flow of shared cognition across the cohort. And when all of these diverse elements come together, one can feel a joyous coherent magic.

> *Andy's story.* When is a human system? When is a system human? Coherent & porous, the boundaries of a system indicate, order, implicate, elicit a sense of purpose and perspective within our larger world. I'm in a town hall meeting; it's day 5 together of a weeklong course. Our cohort is gathered in a circle—a few chairs at odd angles swirling commas and apostrophes into the conversation. We are reflecting on what is happening in our working groups and in the "system" as a whole. Our assignment: to share our work-life situations and come up with strategies for balancing one's life work. We each have brought with us our various constellations of values, expectations, dreams, pressures. Each from various jobs, cultures, families, professional and educational milieus. The common ground is that upon which we stand as these constellations circle above.
>
> Many of us are confused. The word "ambiguity" keeps popping up. Occasional moments of eloquence, outbursts of clarity, draw attention to where the sea ends and the land begins. I'm mostly quiet this time. Hearing the bouncing ball of uncertainty. Beginning to dawn on the many ways in which each group is influencing each other. How the task influences how each group operates. How the setting and environment influences the system as a whole. How the many levels of system-in-environment are constantly in mutual influence. How in many ways, the system influences my individual behavior—group as container for how I come to be.
>
> Through this perspective appears the multiple recursive interactions by which a human system comes to be. The world, which we make, as we act.

> And coherence rests on the capacity that people have to understand themselves and their interactions within the various constellations each person brings—while the environment rings little bells, big bells.

While common ground creates shared knowledge, differences create multiple open possibilities to reorganize the self and the system. Organized multivocality (Resnick, 1991), engineered by listening to each other's narratives, creates collective comprehension that is indicative of shared cognition.

Integrating Intellectual, Social, and Emotional Learning: From Fragmented to Whole

The notion that the mind exists as independent from the body, separating rationality from emotion, has profoundly influenced Western culture since Descartes. However, cognitive research has re-emphasized the role that emotions play in learning. The same brain structures that regulate physiology and behavior are indispensable to normal cognitive processes (Damasio, 2000). Therefore, consciousness is linked to emotion. Nonetheless, the impact of the Cartesian view on education has tended to privilege intelligence as a head process, while relegating socio-emotional learning (heart processes) to outside the four walls of the classroom. This has resulted in the fragmentation of the learner and a disconnection between theory and practice.

CL acknowledges that learners are emotional and social beings. Affective issues motivate adults to attend educational programs, shape their interest in the subject, and influence how they engage with the material, their experiences, the teacher, and one another (Dirkx, 2006). But when social and emotional needs are denied, and only intellectualism valued, conditions create a disorienting imbalance (Mayes, 2005). This can then relegate these needs to the "shadow side" of the self (Palmer, 1999), the container for qualities and experiences one denies or disowns.

> *Ann-Louise's story.* I'm in my daughter's bare room, painting it a turquoise only a 12-year-old could live with. It's a nice break from the academic work that I've been juggling with my career and motherhood. As I paint, my mind is on finding a client for my final project.
>
> At this time in the master's program, I'm feeling great. I've worked hard for the past year and a half. So far, it's been the most challenging thing I've ever done and the most fulfilling. I've been rewarded with high marks and recognized for my academic achievement. Most importantly, being in the program has rekindled my self-confidence.
>
> And yet, I can't seem to shake this sense of vulnerability. Despite my renewed confidence, I am still struggling to imagine my future career, one where I could use my whole self. This combination of confidence and vulnerability has an elusive familiarity to it. "Don't ignore these feelings," I tell myself. If I've learned anything from interacting with my cohort in the container created by faculty, it's that I'm okay. My feelings are okay. They are essential to learning, a window into my soul—isn't that what Dirkx said?
>
> Suddenly, it hits me. I start to cry, to sob out loud. I am brought back to when I studied engineering. It was a time when I had dreams, a time when I felt I could create whatever life I wanted. For over twenty years, I've been blaming my first

> engineering (harsh) manager for derailing my dreams. Now, I realize that blame may have served the useful purpose of denying a more traumatic event.
>
> When the massacre at École Polytechnique happened, it jolted me[1]. Those fourteen young women who were killed were just like me, only they studied on the other side of the mountain. My male colleagues instantly made it clear it was too difficult to talk about. The press focused the public conversation on violence against women and gun control. While the engineering profession's inclusion of women hadn't changed, any barriers facing women in engineering were now definitively undiscussable. I put on a brave face … a protective suit of armor and moved on.
>
> Aside from the anniversary of the shooting when I take a solitary moment to remember, I try not to think about it. Strangely, in the last few months, I have been unsettled by reminders. Now, sitting alone amongst the paint and brushes, I need to unpack this. How could I have buried this so deep and never connected it to the loss of my dreams? I google the massacre to surface the shooter's words I had suppressed. "You are all a bunch of feminists," he said before his victims' desperate denial. I realize I had internalized the message, "You can be a woman engineer as long as you don't change engineering."
>
> As an engineering student, I imagined a successful career. I would have a good job, travel, and earn a good living. I would own a lakefront property and spend time with friends on the water. Most importantly, I imagined I would engage with the world with confidence and without limits.
>
> Instead of marching towards my dreams, and just as those women had done in the face of violence, I denied that I was a feminist in order to protect myself. Strength and confidence no longer felt safe. I became hyper-vigilant about fitting it, about not being noticed, and about not making waves. I made myself small.
>
> The cohort environment, where imperfect students bump up against each other and share deeply, nurtured compassion. In seeing my cohort's struggles, I began to accept my own. With a deepened respect for my feelings, I am reclaiming my strength and confidence. My dreams have been dormant long enough.

CL creates a learning space that allows for emotional material to be part of the curriculum, validating emotional landscapes as a legitimate locale for learning. This landscape provides multiple and rich opportunities to explore the complex construction of effective collaborative work relationships. This gives rise to occasions to explore the situations that prompt individuals to hide their talents, virtues, and potentials, which, if they were to be open about them, might place them psychologically in emotional or social peril (Mayes, 2005). If these shadow processes are consciously acknowledged and nurtured, they can help individuals become more complete—

[1] On December 6, 1989, a gunman walked into the Polytechnique Montréal, an engineering school affiliated with the Université de Montréal in Montreal, Quebec. After delivering an antifeminist rant, he murdered 14 women, 12 of whom were engineering students, and wounded an additional 10 women and 4 men.

more *whole* (Mayes, 2005). Faculty can *invite* (and we use this term deliberately) students to face those elements banished to the shadow side (perhaps to survive family or cultural dynamics) and reintegrate them into the self in a way that permits a more genuine, compassionate, and satisfying existence. This invitation is not exclusive to those dimensions of the self that are nasty and unpleasant. Liberating the golden shadow (Miller, 1991), our suppressed creative potential, is key to revealing the unique strengths and latent possibilities of each student and each cohort.

Shortcomings and the Difficult Side of CL

Up until now, we have presented unique, positive aspects of CL. And the research about CL tends to accentuate this dimension. It would, however, be naïve and disingenuous to act as if it is not without its pitfalls. Though the benefits are undeniable, researchers note that students frequently report negativity and tensions between students or between students and faculty (Barnett et al., 2000); that they or classmates were excluded, pigeonholed into limiting stereotypical roles, or trapped in unpleasant or unhealthy relationships (Teitel, 1997); that dominating individuals hampered the exploration of diverse perspectives and marginalized certain student voices (Donaldson & Scribner, 2003); that collusion and lingering cliquishness impeded learning and professional growth (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003); or that students experienced irreconcilable conflict early in the life of the cohort (Maher, 2005). Scribner and Donaldson (2001) examined how group dynamics can foster or impede learning. They concluded that because of the intensity of social relations within cohorts, including power struggles, marginalization, and defensiveness, some learning outcomes were overshadowed by the affective learning that took place. So, while the findings from many studies are positive, others suggest that CL may be prone to serious difficulties.

Loss, Pain, and Difficult Knowledge

Loss (in the broadest sense) and pain are processes that characterize human endeavor and are precipitated whenever people "lose" their psychological attachments to familiar people, places, structures, and practices. Any change, even a positive, desirable one, can have a loss component. But the classroom is usually "a space in which a renunciation of our histories of loss is an unsaid precondition to come in" (Hurst, 2010, p. 33). Nonetheless, we carry our losses and the associated pain, wherever we go. Loss can amplify our emotions when the classroom power relations we have come to expect are disrupted; when we are perceived in clichéd, discriminatory ways; when we have lost our academic footing because our learning spaces are nebulous and ambiguous; and when we illuminate aspects of our identities with which we are uncomfortable in relation to the wider world. This is particularly true when the learning landscape is further complicated by CL's reliance on interactive learning. Since the cohort becomes a site for both educating others and learning from them, students experience themselves in dual roles simultaneously, which often proves difficult for many individuals to inhabit successfully, creating a volatile and contradictory climate.

> *Colin's story.* Here are your ghosts. There's a group of people you meet. You've never heard of them before and some you will never want to hear from again. But when you walk out you stink of death because the people you meet are new, yes, but the ghosts you brush up against are old. They are all there waiting for you to see and meet again. Welcome.

There's one that catches you. He's older than you, difficult, rebellious, positions himself in a way that you admire if don't necessarily condone. You find yourself fighting with him and also wanting to be close with him. The fighting is a way for each of you to say, yes, I see you, but no, no way—or maybe that's just in your head. And you don't understand him and feel perhaps that he doesn't need to be understood, especially by you. And then he's gone from the group—kicked out—and you write a wonderful paper about his loss and how the group handled it. You get an A. But you don't reveal—in fact, you erase a footnote that says—that in writing the paper, in becoming somewhat obsessed with this ghost, you realize, perhaps halfway through, that you've been chasing another living ghost, and that ghost is your brother.

Because while writing you remember the only Christmas he visited and how he too misbehaved and was disappeared. And you realize that there is still part of you back there, behind your mother, who's at the door, you're still hooked on the words that he spoke after disappearing into a strange city for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and halfway through Boxing Day, ran into some old friends, he said, and who were they? And of course, they were not friends, and it took you a long time for that to land didn't it the awfulness that he found anyone, anyone at all, rather than spend that time with you. Or that's how it felt anyway. It all comes back how it felt to know he was gone for good but not know where. You had been so excited. And afterwards perhaps a little ashamed. Those you keep to yourself—the excitement as much as the shame.

And some will leave that you'll barely remember. When someone who saw an old ghost in this departed person says let's all take a minute to remember the people who've left us—yes, people actually say that—you say, oh yeah, her, him, them, those ghosts, what are they up to now? And then it's on to other things. But for your own ghosts, no.

And then there are those that you are glad to see go or you wish had gone sooner because beyond all the theory and all the hope you know in your guts there are those people who are just destructive, who live to make things die, and from a distance you'll be able to see that they were only doing what they had been taught but Christ it's not fun when you're in the rooms they're in the act of fouling.

And then you graduate and all 15 of your cohort are invited to lunch and it will be a wonderful goodbye—it is referred to as a closure, as in, it's something we need to move on—and six people will show up. Well, nothing really surprises you anymore does it? Some, I'll bet, you'll never see again, even though these are people you wept with and who witnessed your own becoming—sooner rather than later the memories will come to you as do fragments from a dream.

But they did something didn't they, this cohort? Because that brother of yours, living and breathing across the ocean, he is not just a ghost, no, he's flesh and blood. He's still with you, but he's not only at your door, looking pleased, looking haunted. He has changed as you have changed. Things have changed.

> Because you can do something can't you? It's a very special thing to be able to do. You can conjure up the ghosts of others and see them through the loss and pain. Because of this cohort your vision has changed. You can see ghosts in a room and loss in a face and not be afraid.
>
> Who's your brother now? Here he is. It's time to look again.

CL attempts to bridge the world of practice and the classroom; it also bridges the classroom with a world that is wounded or wounds. This connection contains the seeds for a syllabus for learning about loss and pain. This learning is a kind of difficult knowledge, representations of social traumas and the individual's encounters with them (Pitt & Britzman, 2003). One cannot learn *about* difficult knowledge (difficult childhood experiences, social inequities, or organizational trauma) by obtaining a collection of facts; this just serves to distance us from what we are learning. Learning *from* difficult knowledge involves insight and thinking about how the learner is implicated in and affected by this knowledge (Hurst, 2010). Learning *from* difficult knowledge happens in the witnessing (Felman, 1992). Teaching *using* difficult knowledge cannot be done at a distance and demands that faculty implicate themselves deeply in the learning relationship. However, these are not skills taught in professional development seminars, and it is called difficult knowledge for a reason. Engaging with difficult knowledge is not only a matter of what loss and pain are represented and witnessed, but also implies the prospect of encountering one's own loss and pain (Pitt & Britzman, 2003), which can only be achieved through a pedagogy of repair within a stable and dependable holding environment that promotes healing (Pearl, 2018).

Scapegoating

The scapegoat refers to the ancient ritual of sending a goat into the desert to symbolically atone for the sins of the many. Currently, it indicates a person who is assigned the blame for all that goes wrong, regardless of the contributions of others. Scapegoating is a common practice of simplifying and reducing others for our own purposes (Kahn, 2008), usually to manage anxiety. By transforming others into one-dimensional caricatures, we cast them into roles to play out the script of a story of our making, ignoring who they really are and what they can achieve. This is especially true within experiential learning contexts in professional education (Gilmore & Anderson, 2011). Scapegoating is a maladaptive way of dealing with the tension and ambiguity within CL that is a result of learning shock (Griffiths et al., 2005), experiences of acute frustration, confusion, and anxiety experienced by students who find themselves exposed to unfamiliar learning and teaching methods, bombarded by unexpected and disorienting cues.

> *Sarah's story.* At the time it's like the whole universe had come unhinged, like everything I thought I knew about myself, and the world, was false. I was propelled into a terrifying free fall.
>
> **How did I get there? How did I become so lost, with no firm ground beneath me or even within me?**
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> Entering the master's program, I'm excited about the group work and inspired by the wisdom and skill set of my cohort members. I arrive at the weeklong lab ready to dive into the learning and happy to see everyone again.

I guess others are anxious, but I'm genuinely excited about being placed in a new small group. I love getting to know new people.

The first day or two go smoothly, though in sensing into myself, I become conscious of my fragile emotional state.

I am not entirely at home here. I don't know where my home is anymore.

I know I'm embarking upon a huge personal transition. After years of living in a rural spiritual community I'm moving back to a big city, and I'm a student again. I'm in new and uncertain territory. Feeling confident in my relationships (why shouldn't I?) and at ease with my state, I share this insight with my small task group and ask for their patience with me.

On the 2nd evening I offer some well-intended "feedback" to a friend from my small group regarding his behavior in the cohort: I see how his words present him as a far less kind and tolerant person than I know him to be. I'm concerned that others might get the wrong idea about him. Our conversation goes well, but the next day in our small group he suddenly and fiercely criticizes me for questioning our group process, accusing me of blocking the work.

I'm not sure what happens next; it all happens so fast! Somebody suspends business … what ensues is an argument of sorts about what is relevant to our work. I just want us to do a good job! We are misunderstanding and misinterpreting each other. I am upset and crying, speaking in polarized terms.

He then requests more group time to share how he felt attacked by me the night before—a far cry from my intentions. He takes this opportunity to berate me and provides a series of personal criticisms (ah yes, "feedback").

I didn't realize he was angry and hurt. But suddenly it's all about what's wrong with me, and he won't let people share their impressions.

The rest of the group observes this silently, without intervening, and so this one person's judgment becomes the group's accepted story.

Feeling frustrated, fearful, nauseated … everything I say is misunderstood. I try not to take it personally, but I do because I feel that my contributions are meaningless.

Having always had such a strong sense of myself, I can't understand why this situation has so much power over me. Because of the structure of the course, whatever happens in our small group is shared with members of the other two task groups through daily consulting triads. Knowing this, I'm convinced that the entire cohort despises me and sees me as an emotional wreck and a block. I'm terrified to speak for fear of being judged. The more I question myself, the less I am able to relate to these people who I had been so excited to connect with just a few days ago. My sense of alienation and isolation grow stronger with each moment, and to my great dismay I notice that my fear of others' perception of me is now creating the very behavior that supports such a perception. I'm profoundly stuck.

> **I want to leave. I want to go home—where the ground doesn't crumble beneath my feet. Where it's okay to cry, where people understand my good intentions.**
>
> A colleague suggests I apologize to my group … which I do…. And I am tentatively invited to stay, but only if I no longer question what we are doing and simply join in the activities. Otherwise, I am told I can "get the f*** out." So, I muster up my best acting skills to fake enthusiasm for our work together. But what I really feel is vertigo from the surrealism I am living with disgust at my own inauthenticity.
>
> But, to my amazement it works and gradually the small group's cold stare, and then the cohort's judging gaze, moves past me. I'm shaken to my core, deeply confused, but also immensely relieved.
>
> But then the anger and blame … his anger and blame which embody something about our cohort … are transferred onto another person. I see it happen, watch as the cohort's belief that she is crazy becomes her own belief, then as her behavior reflects the same. It looks so familiar, seems so obvious. But I'm too afraid to say anything. And again, our silence … our teachers' silence … is the most powerful statement made, because it makes it okay.

One way of coping with these threatening feelings of anxiety is to attribute the source of these difficult feelings to an external object or person—the scapegoat. The scapegoat is subtly pressured into thinking, feeling, and behaving in a manner congruent with the notion that *they* are the source of the problem. Unfortunately, it is common in CL groups for individuals to attempt to create a scapegoat in order to avoid and defend against their own need to change (Vince & Martin, 1993). If left unchecked, scapegoating can result in even deeper dysfunction (Gabriel & Griffiths, 2008).

Both students and faculty engage in pigeonholing as a way of imposing order on uncertainty. Faculty may be reluctant to intervene since they may be the actual target. But it is essential that both parties work at dialogue to disentangle themselves from such psychodynamic forces since these lead to personal and cohort stagnation (Vince & Martin, 1993), the antithesis of CL. Dialogue can flourish in a safe and reliable holding environment (Pearl, 2018), which addresses the different elements of experience and emotion, connecting them into meaningful associations.

Teaching Dynamics: Challenge of Creating Crucible Spaces

Emotions and learning are powerful sources of meaning creation. They are interrelated, interactive, and interdependent. CL creates crucible spaces for these two dynamics to ferment and collide, resulting in pivotal, intense transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000) that can suffuse an entire learning system.

Since emotions are social phenomena, culturally shaped and mediated, they can be pleasant and/or exciting or unpleasant and/or disturbing, depending upon the meaning assigned to them and their impact on relationships and networks. Emotions may be triggered by feelings of disconfirmation that often precipitate learning (Taylor, 2011): vulnerabilities due to knowing and/or not knowing; clashes between active knowledge construction and student expectations; fear of failure, humiliation, or disappointment when incrementally gaining competence; dependency on "all-knowing" faculty to provide the "right" answers; and self-doubt and

compromised esteem. In the larger context of organizational learning, Schein contends that, though anxiety inhibits learning, anxiety is also necessary if learning is going to happen at all (Coutu, 2002). Indeed, successfully managing change means successfully transforming anxiety into generative energy. Therefore, learning through emotions is seen as a key component of CL.

This emotional intensity makes extreme demands on students' ability to learn, and on their emotional lives. To help contain the emotional turbulence of transformational learning, faculty create classrooms that are containers, places where learning is enhanced by students feeling connected to each other, "surrounded by acceptance and protection, a space where it is possible to be oneself, devoid of threat and to get on with living life without fear" (Lederach & Lederach, 2010, as cited in Pearl, 2018, p. 43). These are expansive spaces for experimentation and play, which are safe without being stifling and/or rigid or lax and/or indulgent (Gilmore & Anderson, 2011). This is not to say that faculty should view anxiety as an uncomfortable feeling to be managed; rather, anxiety is seen as emotional energy that, when bounded and held in a space, and worked with, can be transformed in the service of transformational learning (Dirkx, 2006), learning that transforms the self. Faculty attempt to design, or to capitalize on synchronicity, a textural learning space that is "good enough" to enable and support learning, rather than preventing it (French, 1997). When emotional containment is adequately handled, the learning experience helps students understand and develop themselves as instruments in helping individuals and systems navigate the hurly-burly of change (Cheung-Judge, 2012).

> *Rosemary's story.* I am standing on a bridge overlooking a babbling stream. The air is cool this time of day. The birds call to each other to ensure their connections and identity…*chicka-dee-dee-dee…chicka-dee-dee-dee…*It is peaceful here this morning in late summer. But I feel anything but peaceful.
>
> It is early Thursday morning … teaching day 6 of a 7-day intensive course about organizational systems and intervention. I am dreading going in this morning. I feel alone … filled with negativity … anxiety … fear … anger … and exasperation. I am trying to hold back the tears that come all too easily when I am frustrated. And the irony is … none (well, maybe some) of it is mine. If anyone asks what I am doing here, staring into the stream, late for breakfast, I will tell them, "I am playing Poohsticks,"[2] then deftly make a joke, steering the conversation to what is going on with them. NOT that I am procrastinating … OR trying to duck and escape…. That should fool them … at least for a little while.
>
> Judith wanders over. "How are you? How does it feel to be the faculty *bad object*?" And I am undone. The emotions spill over the rim. As we talk, she puts her arm around me.
>
> If learning is anxiety-provoking for students within the cohort, being a container as a faculty member can be terrifying! When I first began facilitating learning labs, I did

[2] Poohsticks is a game first mentioned in *The House at Pooh Corner* by A. A. Milne. It is a simple game, which is played on any bridge over running water. Each player drops a stick on the upstream side of a bridge and the one whose stick first appears on the downstream side of the bridge is the winner.

> an apprenticeship at NTL. I was already an experienced professor and group facilitator, but during this apprenticeship, I was constantly in a state of uncertainty and self-doubt. I would go off by myself and obsess over every little intervention and action and/or reaction, dissecting it to see what I was "doing wrong." By day three, I was ready to go home crying, never to show my face in a group again. It was not until I had a conversation with Michael, a trainer, that I was able to understand that many of the feelings I was experiencing were those of the participants in the program. Being the "container," I was resonating with and echoing the emotional turbulence within the system. The spoon that stirred the pot was clanging and banging against all the sides.
>
> I have since gotten a bit better at differentiating between my interior feeling states and what I perceive from the environment. But I am constantly facing my own feelings in this process: fears about my incompetence; uncertainty about how much control to exert; maintaining a facilitative stance instead of being seduced into the telling stance of the omniscient teacher; and how can I best be a healing presence.
>
> But being the container also presents me with opportunities to learn. My favorite Achilles' heel, which affords me with plenty of learning opportunities, is my interpersonal need to be liked. Often being the focus of projected anxiety and anger … the *bad object* … I am challenged to understand and work constructively with students' behavior and their ambivalent feelings, to discriminate between what is my responsibility as faculty, and what is a result of the task we are asking students to execute. I work hard to bear my share of the feelings that are unloaded onto me and curtail my defensive reactions. And to face my own fears about conflict, anger, and violence. I am not always successful. But I strive to maintain focus on the purpose of learning … that learning is about the struggle and the art of being human.

French (1997) outlines strategies for instructors to implement for classrooms to function as effective containers: clear documentation, boundaries, rationale and structure, and the provision of refreshments (as symbolic of nurturing). However, one of the most potent is the unconventional university faculty role as caring *and* challenging. These characteristics are the glue that binds teachers and students together and makes life in classrooms meaningful, crafting creative collaborative systems (Reilly, 2010). Caring and constructive challenging shapes the group's culture, creating a supportive web of relationships. Affect and cognition then merge seamlessly into an integrated, interdependent union. Engagement with the task and the willingness to challenge oneself is maximized when collaboration is pleasant, warm, and responsive. Faculty have power, and when they use this power to establish caring in the service of continuity of place, people, purpose, and curriculum (Noddings, 2005), they create a safe, secure holding environment that encourages the great risking that precedes great achievement.

Discussion

Browne-Ferrigno and Muth's call (2003) for a nationwide longitudinal study to explore CL has yet to be realized. Yet, the use of cohorts as an instructional delivery model continues to be recommended for professional education programs. CL can be a double-edged sword with both significant opportunities for learning and growth, and considerable potential for harmful dynamics. Therefore, if a program decides to implement a cohort delivery model in order to

facilitate the deep learning that is required in educating future professionals, there are certain strategies that can support both students and faculty to make the most of CL.

Since generative relationships are fundamental to nurturing multisubjectivity and multivocality, it is important to use learner-centered classroom activities that are interactive, collaborative, and stimulate conversation, reflection, shared inquiry, and interdependence, such as problem-based learning, small-group and whole-group reflection assignments and sessions, group discussions, and team field projects. It is also important to acknowledge the necessity of building into the program informal social spaces free of the pressures of grades, expectations, and achievement. These informal spaces deepen relationships, allow social bonding to grow, and strengthen personal ties that can be leveraged in the future to support learning. Faculty must also be included in these informal spaces since they too are part of the cohort system. These social spaces surmount a significant barrier to fostering multisubjectivity and multivocality, the "lack of trust in our own and each other's ability to see and hear through our differences and come together with shared purpose" (Silverberg, 2003, p. 691). They also reinforce the psychological safety that sustains taking the risks to tell our own truths.

When learning is conceptualized as a relational activity that occurs in a relational space, trust takes on a central importance (Silverberg, 2003). When creating ZPD, zones that ferment shared cognition, spaces must be safe for students to disclose what is in their hearts and on their minds, take risks without fear of repercussions, and fail in order to learn from mistakes. Trust allows self-disclosure and critical self-examination and re-examination in full view of self and others. It is within this dialogic space that trust is born, and continually renews itself, increasing learning.

A group of students with a common goal does not automatically constitute a learning community; learning communities evolve over time and with intention. Faculty must take responsibility for creating initial and continuing positive group and community development activities that create a sense of cohesion, compassion, collegiality, and trust, as well as build up members' capacities for group processing, dialogue, and conflict resolution. These are skills that are key for creating and maintaining a robust CL culture. While it may appear that spending time on these activities reduces the time spent on course content, ignoring these potentially toxic dynamics can poison the learning climate for everyone. Using a cohort model does not guarantee that effective CL will develop (Barnett et al., 2000).

Conclusion

Teaching and learning using CL is not for the faint of heart. It is *la vida loca*, the crazy life, and like the song[3] it is "Upside, inside out … push and pull … wear you out …" since it is complex, turbulent, "chaordic," and unpredictable. But it provides a potentially profound site for learning.

[3] *Livin' La Vida Loca*, written by Desmond Child, was released in 1999 by singer Ricky Martin.

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