Doctoral Level Counseling Students’
Experiences and Perceptions of Learning
in a Cohort Environment

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Abstract
Learning community literature supports the use of student cohorts to enhance learning through increased peer interaction and common course work. Counselor education programs utilize learning community models to provide a supportive and challenging environment for students to develop personally and professionally, yet the field lacks research to support the application of learning communities for graduate counseling students. Researchers employed the qualitative method of phenomenography to identify various ways doctoral counseling students conceptualize and experience learning in a cohort over the course of a single academic year. Participants were all 10 members of a single southwestern U.S. university counseling program doctoral cohort of full-time students between 20 and 59 years of age with 5 members 20-29, 4 members 30-39, 1 member 50-59; 8 female, 2 male; 9 White non-Hispanic, 1 African-American. Data were transcripts from 30 one-hour interviews, three for each participant over the course of their first year of study. Results revealed nine dynamic structural aspects of learning: dialogue, diversity, knowledge, motivation, support, shared experience, relationship development, interpersonal awareness, and conflict. Findings support the use of learning communities in doctoral level counselor education programs. Cohort members demonstrated increasing awareness of the potential learning benefits of cohort interaction and developed more in depth strategies over time to utilize the cohort to enhance learning. Future counselor educators may now with greater confidence design learning communities and curriculum to facilitate doctoral cohort development for optimal student interaction.